

# **MULTIPLE PASTS AND POSSIBLE SELVES**

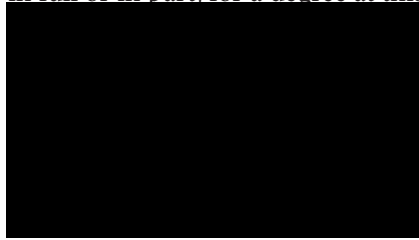
**NEGOTIATING UNCERTAINTY IN THE ACTUALIST  
HISTORICAL NOVEL**

**PHILIPPA CLAIRE SMITH**

Doctor of Creative Arts  
Writing and Society Research Group  
Western Sydney University  
2016

# STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks are due to my supervisors Ivor Indyk, Chris Andrews and Sara Knox for their guidance, especially in knowing when to curtail my exploration of infinite possibilities; to my partner, René Christen, and parents, Ross and Sally Smith, for their patience and support; to Tom Watson for making quantum physics as understandable as it can be; to Chad Parkhill for his sharp eye for detail and indefatigable engagement with the task at hand; to Peter Doyle, Nerida Campbell and all at the Justice and Police Museum for the fresh insights on Sydney's history that were brought to light in the *City of Shadows* exhibition, which provoked my initial interest in Falleni's story in 2008; to Suzanne Falkiner, Mark Tedeschi, and Lachlan Philpott for their rigorous contributions to research on Falleni's life. And lastly and most importantly, to Eugenia Falleni, Annie Crawford, and all who have suffered trying to live and love in ways that don't fit. My hope is that our imaginative visions will evolve to accommodate more possible ways of being.

## A NOTE ON REFERENCING STYLE

I have used the Chicago system of referencing throughout this thesis but, in passages of extended analysis requiring a large number of citations of the one text, I have chosen to use in-text citations in order to create a smoother reading experience.

In the novel (pages 235 to 255) I have chosen a more relaxed referencing style that communicates the most essential information for the reader at this given point.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>NEGOTIATING UNCERTAINTY IN THE ACTUALIST HISTORICAL NOVEL</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION: THE INFLUENCE OF THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>PART ONE: OSCILLATING BETWEEN METAFICTION AND REALISM</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>PART TWO: EUGENIA FALLENI</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>CONCLUSION: NEGOTIATING UNCERTAINTY IN THE WRITING OF <i>HALF-WILD</i></b>	<b>75</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>78</b>
<b><i>HALF-WILD</i></b>	<b>82</b>
<b>TALLY HO</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>HARRY CRAWFORD</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>NINA FALLENI</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>THE MAN-WOMAN</b>	<b>219</b>
<b>JEAN FORD</b>	<b>260</b>

# ABSTRACT

This thesis is composed of two parts: an exegesis, which examines how uncertainty, multiplicity and paradox have been negotiated in works of ‘actualist’ historical fiction, and a creative component, the novel *Half-Wild*, which explores the multiple identities and contradictory accounts at play in the various lives of the historical figure Eugenia Falleni (1875–1938).

The exegesis opens with an examination of the influence that ‘uncertainty’, as described by the ‘new physics’, has had on the twentieth-century literary imagination. It focuses in particular on the relationship between Neils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg’s interpretation of quantum physics and the troubling of history, gender and identity in narrative fiction. Susan Strehle’s definition of ‘actualist’ fiction—positioned between realism and metafiction—is introduced in order to discuss works of historical fiction that engage with uncertain, dynamic pasts, as opposed to a fixed, fact-focused past.

The argument continues with a close reading of Hilary Mantel’s *A Place of Greater Safety* and Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, two novels engaged in ‘actual’ history which oscillate between realism and metafiction in order to destabilise the received versions of their referent subjects and events. These novels are selected as examples of how historical fiction’s emphasis is not now on the determining of fact, but on the engagement with history as an act or process—a writing *through* fact and interaction with sources, a combining, recombining and troubling of possible ways things were, without eschewing the integrity of the facts themselves. The exegesis concludes with an extended analysis of the sources pertaining to the life, trial for murder, and death of the historical figure Eugenia Falleni, and how these sources have been used, ignored, or interacted with by other authors who have narrativised her life.

I continue the argument by applying the principles of Strehle’s actualist fiction in my own novel, *Half-Wild*. The novel explores themes of indeterminacy, possibility, and paradox within representations of Falleni’s life by allowing contradictory versions of her story to co-exist in the same narrative. It makes use of collage and the juxtaposition of documentary materials, such as newspaper reports and court transcripts, as well as first-person narration and free indirect style to perform an ‘inhabitation’ of multiple, often contradictory, points of view.

The novel is divided into five parts, each focusing on a different persona of Falleni's: as tomboy Tally Ho growing up in Wellington, New Zealand; as the adult called both Harry and Jack Crawford in Sydney; as the cross-dressing Italian woman Nina Falleni; as the 'man-woman' convicted by the judiciary and Australian tabloid press of murdering her first wife, Annie; and as Jean Ford, a woman lying in a coma at Sydney Hospital after being struck by a car on Oxford St, Paddington, eight years after her release from prison. For a writer in 2016, it is difficult to affect a naïve obliviousness to how narrative frameworks manipulate the aspects of the past being described, or to how that past is itself linguistic, fictive, and performative in nature. With Falleni's story refracted into five parts, each part destabilises the others: any reference to one 'authentic' self underpinning her various personae is avoided, allowing contradiction to inform the multiple expressions of her fluid identity, and, at the same time, the parts to operate as their own complete, immersive fiction-worlds, each contextualising one of the many 'authentic' selves.

**NEGOTIATING  
UNCERTAINTY IN THE  
ACTUALIST HISTORICAL  
NOVEL**



---

## INTRODUCTION

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE ON TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

In *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, literary critic Susan Strehle claims that “the new physics has reimagined reality. While other terms could be added, the new reality may be described as relative, discontinuous, energetic, statistical, subjective, and uncertain.”<sup>1</sup> In a world that is still grappling with the perspective-rattling discoveries of quantum physics, authors of novels based on actual events are faced with a paradox: they must find a way of acknowledging that history is slippery, the reliability of its facts prone to being destabilised at any given moment, while at the same time permit themselves to invent with the conviction and imaginative vivacity of one who ‘knows’. In part one of this exegesis I will compare how two very different writers of ‘actual’ people and events—Hilary Mantel and Thomas Pynchon—have negotiated this paradox, and how the anxiety of ‘not knowing’ has shaped their works, both stylistically and conceptually. In part two I will explore how uncertainty has problematised the researching of an indeterminate identity, Eugenia Falleni. But first, by way of introduction, I would like to take a closer look at the concept of uncertainty in literature, as defined by the twentieth-century physicist Werner Heisenberg, and what his definition of uncertainty has come to mean for writers who engage with facts in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

### GALILEO AND UNCERTAINTY IN LITERATURE

In *Science and Imagination*, Marjorie Hope Nicolson shows how the poetic imagination of the seventeenth century was “not only influenced, but actually changed” by the “new astronomy” brought about by the telescope and Galileo’s subsequent discoveries:

---

1. Susan Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 13.

---

The century was aware less of the position of the world than of the immensity of the universe, and the possibility of a plurality of worlds. It is this which troubles and enthral; the solid earth shrinks to minute proportions as man surveys the new cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

This new awareness of universal scale and possible multiple worlds led to exultation in some poetry and drama of the time, while other poets wrote of destabilisation, uncertainty and fragmentation—themes often considered intrinsic to modernist literature of the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> As Nicolson points out, Donne engages with the new discoveries of Galileo and his contemporaries first with scepticism and doubt, such as when he writes, “And new Philosophy calls all in doubt ... ’Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone.”<sup>4</sup> Also present in the poetry of the seventeenth century are the typically ‘modernist’ feelings of inconstancy; the feeling that the world as it was known has been ‘inverted’, and may yet be again. Here, Nicolson quotes Lovelace:

Nor be too confident, fix’d on the shore,  
 For even that too borrows from the store  
 Of her rich Neighbour, since now wisest know,  
 (And this to Galileo’s judgement ow)  
 The palsie Earth it self is every jot  
 As frail, inconstant, wavering as that blot  
 We lay upon the Deep.<sup>5</sup>

Nicolson does acknowledge that the new themes emerging in seventeenth century literature had “little to do with the problem of the relative position of the earth and sun,” which had already been established by Copernicus, or even “the consequence of man’s knowledge that his earth is not a special creation of God’s, the centre of the universe”.<sup>6</sup> And yet after the introduction of the ‘perspective glass’, Nicolson notes an emerging appreciation of ‘frame’ and ‘perspective’ as ways of seeing which can be adopted, exchanged or distorted—laying the imaginative groundwork for Einstein’s theories of general and special relativity three centuries later.<sup>7</sup>

While the experience of uncertainty can be found in the writing of any era during which major paradigm-shifting discoveries are made, it could be argued that with the wavering importance of the church, the destabilising discoveries made by physicists in the early twentieth century were more acutely felt throughout the collective consciousness of the time.

---

2. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Science and Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Great Seal Books, 1956), 2–3.

3. *Ibid.*, 28.

4. John Donne cited in *ibid.*, 30.

5. Richard Lovelace cited in *ibid.*, 34.

6. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

7. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

---

## THE SPECIAL AND GENERAL THEORIES OF RELATIVITY

Three years after the publication of *Relativity: the Special and the General Theory* (1916), Albert Einstein became an international celebrity. His claim that gravity bent light was confirmed by the eclipse observations made by British astronomer Arthur Eddington in 1919, and shortly afterwards Einstein's book was translated into English.<sup>8</sup> At a little over one hundred pages long, *Relativity* is concise, and written in straight-forward prose. In his preface, Einstein explicitly states the book is for “readers who, from a general scientific and philosophical point of view, are interested in the theory [of relativity], but who are not conversant with the mathematical apparatus of theoretical physics.”<sup>9</sup> Aimed at a broad readership, *Relativity* gives us an understanding of how Einstein's complex ideas were simplified and thematically adopted by the wider cultural imagination of the early twentieth century.

In his chapters on the special theory of relativity (which is limited to inertial frames of reference) Einstein explains that Galilean conceptions of the “principle of relativity” show that the same event or object can be measured differently by different onlookers, if they are moving relative to one another. For instance, a stone dropped from the window of a moving train carriage will look, to those in the carriage, as if it drops straight towards the embankment, while to an onlooker observing the stone outside the train, the fall of the stone would describe a parabola. But, as Einstein asks in *Relativity*, “do the positions traversed by the stone lie ‘in reality’ on a straight line or on a parabola?”<sup>10</sup> In other words, is there an absolute frame of reference against which we can measure and describe the stone's fall? In the years leading up to Einstein's seminal 1905 paper on special relativity, many physicists used the hypothetical idea of the ‘aether’—that is, invisible matter through which light waves could travel—as the one constant against which all relative frames could be measured. Einstein's paper did away with the need for the ‘aether’ (which was never empirically provable) and reconciled the problem of relative frames in space by insisting that it was the *speed* of light which was absolute, and not the invented matter through which it moved, thus introducing time to his system of co-ordinates and creating a four-dimensional spacetime continuum. In Newtonian mechanics, time is universal, and separate to space; after special relativity, time cannot change irrespective to a change in space, and vice versa. This theoretical means of resolving contradictions in classical physics had significant repercussions on our perception of time and physical matter in space. For example, if reference frame  $K'$  (e.g., the carriage of a train) is moving close to the speed of light, time within that frame will move more slowly than time within the relatively slower reference frame  $K$  (e.g., the embankment), because the speed of light, an absolute, must be the same to all reference frames. What seemed like a logical dodge around a problem of physics has been tested with atomic clocks on aeroplanes, and empirically shown to be true. Einstein later expanded his theory to include accelerating, or non-inertial, frames of reference, creating the general theory of relativity: a new theory of relativity and gravity.

---

8. Nigel Calder, introduction to *Relativity: the Special and the General Theory* by Albert Einstein (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), vii.

9. Einstein, *Relativity*, 3.

10. *Ibid.*, 13.

Although general relativity is incompatible with Galilean relativity and Newton's theory of gravitation, the latter theories could be considered special cases of general relativity, as they continue to hold true in many everyday situations.

While these theories of relativity seemed radical in the early twentieth century, Einstein was not motivated by any anarchic desire to disrupt the laws central to theoretical physics, but rather by a desire to unify theories and resolve contradictions. As he wrote in *Relativity*, “that a principle of such broad generality should hold with such exactness on one domain of phenomena, and yet should be invalid for another, is *a priori* not very probable.”<sup>11</sup> That it was *possible* is precisely what physicists Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr would argue a little over a decade after the publication of *Relativity*—a suggestion Einstein could never come to terms with. Ultimately, Einstein was a “hard realist.”<sup>12</sup> Any paradoxes that presented themselves in theoretical physics were evidence, to Einstein, that a theory was incomplete. Even if space, matter, light and time could be seen to bend or slow or slip, he believed the laws that governed them could not.

## THE COPENHAGEN INTERPRETATION OF QUANTUM PHYSICS

The twentieth-century preoccupation with relativity and epistemological uncertainty is more easily traced to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics than Einstein's theories of relativity. In his book *Physics and Philosophy*, Heisenberg explains that “the change in the concept of reality manifesting itself in quantum theory is not simply a continuation of the past; it seems to be a radical break in the structure of modern science.”<sup>13</sup> While probability functions had been used by theoretical physicists (including Einstein) in the past, they were understood to be a temporary mathematical solution, to be used until more certain laws could be formulated. When probability functions were found to be an essential aspect of quantum mechanics, theoretical physicists faced the struggle of explaining in the language of classical physics why this was the case. Physicist Niels Bohr, supported by Heisenberg and Wolfgang Pauli, argued that any human understanding of quantum physics would be troubled by a series of *irreconcilable* paradoxes. This position became known as the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics.

Possibly the most significant paradox central to the Copenhagen interpretation is the uncertainty principle, proposed by Werner Heisenberg in 1927, which states that the more accurately an electron's position can be determined, the less accurately its momentum can be determined, and vice versa. In mathematics, this canonically conjugate pairing of variables became known as ‘uncertainty relations’ and is still applied in the practice of quantum mechanics to this day.<sup>14</sup> Despite being probabilistic in nature, mathematical formulae that use

---

11. *Ibid.*, 17.

12. David Lindley, introduction to *Physics and Philosophy* by Werner Heisenberg (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), xvii.

13. Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 3.

14. “Quantum Mechanics 1925–1927: The Uncertainty Relations,” American Institute of Physics and David Cassidy, accessed March 4, 2016, <https://www.aip.org/history/exhibits/heisenberg/p08.htm>.

uncertainty relations can yield results to a high degree of accuracy. Laser technology, MRI scanners, and quantum computers could not be built without them.

After some confusion over how to reconcile the particle-like behaviour of electrons with Erwin Schrödinger's convincing argument that electrons also behave like waves, Niels Bohr came to the conclusion that neither quantum mechanics nor classical physics alone could adequately explain the behaviour of quanta. In order to formulate a law of physics, an hypothesis *must* be tested by an observable experiment—however any attempts to account for both wave- and particle-like behaviours through experiment only resulted in contradiction. If electrons were tested for their particle-like behaviour, then they showed particle-like behaviour; if they were tested for wave-like behaviour, then they displayed wave-like behaviour. In order to reconcile these contradictions, Bohr came up with the principle of complementarity, which itself amounted to another paradox, described here by Heisenberg:

Bohr advocated the use of both pictures, which he called 'complementary' to each other. The two pictures are of course mutually exclusive, because a certain thing cannot at the same time be a particle (i.e., substance confined to a very small volume) and a wave (i.e., a field spread out over a large space), but the two complement each other. By playing with both pictures, by going from the one picture to the other and back again, we finally get the right impression of the strange kind of reality behind our atomic experiments.<sup>15</sup>

In order to make the principle of complementarity understood, Heisenberg hypothesised an ideal experiment which imagined a high-power microscope capable of seeing electrons in gamma-ray (very short wavelength) light. But because light had already been shown by Einstein to consist of particles (or photons), Heisenberg argued that there was no way to measure, let alone observe, an electron in its "natural" state. The gamma-ray photon necessary for viewing the electron would, being material, bump into the electron and radically change its nature. This bump would constitute a "wave function collapse" in that the electron would go from being in all its possible states simultaneously, to the "precise" state it is in when observed in disruptive gamma-ray light. This hypothetical experiment presented Heisenberg and his mentor Bohr with another paradox now commonly known as 'the observer effect': the physical act of viewing not only alters what is being viewed, it *determines* what is being viewed. As Heisenberg wrote: "we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning."<sup>16</sup>

In *Physics and Philosophy*, Heisenberg situates "modern physics"—by which he means Einstein's theories of relativity, and quantum physics—in their philosophical and historical context. He summarises the theories of atomic structure first hypothesised by the ancient Greeks, gives a brief overview of the metaphysical questions which preoccupied philosophers during the dark and middle ages, and suggests that, by asserting God and nature's separation from man, Descartes laid the conceptual groundwork for scientific notions of 'objectivity'. As Heisenberg explains, in classical physics "science started from the belief—or should one say from the illusion?—that we could describe the world or at least parts of the world without

---

15. Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 23.

16. *Ibid.*, 32.

any reference to ourselves.”<sup>17</sup> However, physics at the level of quanta was forced to account for the intrusive observer, and thus acknowledge the limits of what can be said to be objectively distinguishable from ourselves. Heisenberg is clear that “quantum theory does not contain genuine subjective features,” in that it “does not introduce the mind of the physicist as a part of the atomic event.” Rather, the observer effect forced physicists to acknowledge that science cannot help but be shaped by the “general human way of thinking”:

[Quantum theory] starts from the [Cartesian] division of the world into the ‘object’ and the rest of the world, and from the fact that at least for the rest of the world we use the classical concepts in our description. This division is arbitrary and historically a direct consequence of our scientific method; the use of the classical concepts is finally a consequence of the general human way of thinking. But this is already a reference to ourselves and in so far our description is not completely objective.<sup>18</sup>

This troubling of ‘objectivity’ could completely undermine the project of science, and yet we know that even if we cannot simultaneously measure the position and momentum of an electron with a high degree of accuracy, we *can* simultaneously measure the position and velocity of planets, and from these measurements predict their behaviour. Classical Newtonian laws of physics *do* apply throughout nature, and from these laws we can arrive at empirically observable, objective, factual data. Likewise, we can arrive at accurate results when experimenting at the level of quanta, though we may not be able to observe how these results are derived, and many stages of these experiments may rely on abstract, probabilistic mathematics. What the Copenhagen interpretation has taught us is that classical laws of physics do not apply *sans* modification at every level of phenomena; and that possibility and paradox cannot always be worked away.

## IMAGINATIVE VISIONS OF THE NEW UNCERTAINTY

Just as quantum physicists warn against the forced application of classical laws at the level of quanta, so too are some scientists and philosophers, including Heisenberg, quick to warn against “the forced application of scientific concepts in domains where they [do] not belong.”<sup>19</sup> And yet, as Julie M. Johnson has pointed out in ‘The Theory of Relativity in Modern Literature,’ “Scientists seeking to construct an image of the universe which explains the way it behaves (rather than simply the way it appears) have repeatedly violated the image of reality which derives from our everyday, sensory experience.” Johnson concludes that “it is little wonder that [theoretical physics] has captured the imagination of the artist.”<sup>20</sup>

---

17. *Ibid.*, 29.

18. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

19. *Ibid.*, 173.

20. Julie M. Johnson, “The Theory of Relativity in Modern Literature: An Overview and *The Sound and the Fury*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 10.2 (1983): 218.

In an attempt to make sense of the influence of Einstein's theories of relativity on the twentieth-century literary imagination, Johnson suggests that the immediate success of Einstein's ideas was partly coincidental:

If Einstein had not come along when he did, after Darwin and the nineteenth-century philosophers, and in the midst of Bergson, Freud, and the experimental aesthetics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, his theory of relativity might have remained obscurely lodged within the bosom of theoretical physics.<sup>21</sup>

She continues:

The time was psychologically ripe for physics to confirm existing metaphysics, so the theory of relativity caught the popular imagination. It was inevitable that it would also capture the literary imagination, for the great gift of relativity theory to modern literature, and to the arts as such, has been to lend the imprimatur of 'fact' to the wholesale relativism which had already seized the fancy.<sup>22</sup>

Science, it seems, does not operate in a cultural or philosophical vacuum, and how the findings of science are absorbed, appropriated, and re-imagined by culture-makers *is* important because it reveals what facts a culture is hungry for; the foundations they would like to underpin their philosophical preoccupations.

But scientists are also prone to borrowing from the imaginations of other culture-makers. Moral philosopher Mary Midgley reminds us that 'the atom' was first imagined by Greek philosophers thousands of years before it was sought by physicists, and that scientific theories are not facts themselves, but "ways of looking at the facts". She likens theories to "pairs of spectacles through which to see the world differently". What makes theories "persuasive in the first place" is "some other quality in their vision, something in them which answers to a wider need."<sup>23</sup> Midgley argues that

new ideas are new imaginative visions, not just in the sense that they involve particular new images (such as Kekule's image of the serpent eating its tail) but in the sense that they involve changes in our larger world—pictures, in the general way in which we conceive life.

To picture [science] as isolated ... as a solitary example of rational thinking, standing out alone against a background of formless emotion—is to lose sight of its organic connection with the rest of our life. And that organic connection is just what makes it important.<sup>24</sup>

It is worth remembering that uncertainty in physics emerged in post-WWI continental Europe, when physicists from many fractured and newly-formed nation-states were trying to reconcile broken and conflicting world-views. Physicists themselves have borrowed

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 219.

23. Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), 34.

24. Ibid., 31.

imaginative visions suggested by quantum physics in the attempt to understand paradox and contradiction at the social level. Heisenberg borrows from the principle of complementarity when suggesting how twentieth-century global culture might achieve “unification”: “through its openness for all kinds of concepts [modern physics] raises the hope that in the final state of unification many different cultural traditions may live together and may combine different human endeavours into a new kind of balance between thought and deed, between activity and meditation.”<sup>25</sup>

## THE INFLUENCE OF THE NEW PHYSICS ON LITERATURE

Condensed and often distorted visions of Einstein’s theories of relativity were enthusiastically adopted by novelists and poets throughout the twentieth century. Johnson gives a comprehensive survey of literature influenced by relativity and acknowledges that “the extent to which relativity theory and its distortions have influenced modern literature is not easily definable,” due to relativity’s entanglement and confusion in the popular imagination with other lines of thought prevalent at the time. In her overview, she focuses on those texts which made explicit reference to Einstein or his theories. She reveals that writers, such as Archibald MacLeish, who parodied or were openly critical of Einstein’s theories for revealing the universe to be in a state of “dissolution”, often misunderstood Einstein’s unifying objectives. She also argues a convincing case for the twentieth-century novel’s fascination with multiple perspectives and abandonment of omniscient narration as having stemmed from writers such as Lawrence Durrell and Jean-Paul Sartre, who were ardent supporters of (their own interpretations of) Einstein’s theories. As Sartre wrote: “there is no more place for a privileged observer in a real novel than in the work of Einstein.”<sup>26</sup>

Curiously for a critic writing in 1983, well after the publication of Pynchon’s quantum physics-obsessed *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Johnson states that “quantum mechanics ... has had no major influence on literature as a whole, even though the bizarre properties of atomic particles suggest a universe far more relativistic than Einstein’s.”<sup>27</sup> Susan Strehle, whose book *Fiction in the Quantum Universe* (1992) traces the influence of quantum physics in six North American novels, would probably beg to differ. I will return to her analyses in the later section on ‘actualist’ fiction.

## UNCERTAIN GENDERS

Evidence of the uncertainty principle’s influence can be traced in postmodern theory, in particular the work of Judith Butler. Her influential 1989 text *Gender Trouble* ‘opened up’ gender possibilities in direct retaliation to feminist theories which attempted to rigidly define

25. Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 180.

26. Jean-Paul Sartre cited in Johnson, “The Theory of Relativity in Modern Literature,” 222.

27. Johnson, “The Theory of Relativity in Modern Literature,” 219.



womanhood, excluding others and creating new hierarchies of gender in the process. In her preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that “the point [of the text] was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, the aim ... was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realised.”<sup>28</sup>

In the ten years that followed the original 1989 publication of *Gender Trouble*, Butler found that her call for an acknowledgement of a field of possible ways of gendered being resulted in a “proliferation of paradoxes” which the text itself did not anticipate. For instance, while some gender theorists have argued that when describing a trans person the nouns ‘woman’ or ‘man’ should be discarded in favour of active verbs “which attest to the constant transformation which ‘is’ the new identity,” some lesbians argue that their butchness is a transition towards their desired state of being a man, and others argue that being butch has nothing to do with being a man.<sup>29</sup> In other words, there are no definable ways of authentically ‘being’ butch, trans, or ‘between’ genders. Just as the principle of complementarity requires an oscillation between classical and quantum-mechanical modes of thought when making sense of the behaviour of atomic particles, likewise, Butler suggests that the onlooker vacillates between gender categories when encountering a person who fits neither the ‘male’ nor ‘female’ categories precisely. When these categories are troubled, Butler argues that “the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be ‘real,’ what we invoke as the naturalised knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality.”<sup>30</sup> To ameliorate our gender uncertainties, we repeat and perform those genders we can comfortably categorise. Sex and gender, to Butler, are not innate, authentic, or absolute aspects of ourselves, but collapsed states: aspects of selfhood performed from amongst a sea of possibilities.

## UNCERTAIN GENRES

This troubling of categories concerning the delineation between the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ has also been a recent preoccupation of authors, critics and philosophers interested in the perceptual difference between fiction and non-fiction. As philosopher Stacie Friend has argued, many of the defining features of either category can be found in its supposed opposite: “The distinction between fiction and non-fiction is not simply the distinction between the true and the false, or between what is known and what is made up,” Friend writes.<sup>31</sup> “Just as works of fiction may refer to real individuals and events and contain true statements, works of non-fiction may contain non-referring expressions and make false claims.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover,

---

28. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2007), viii.

29. *Ibid.*, xii.

30. *Ibid.*, xxiv.

31. Stacie Friend, “Fiction as a Genre,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society* 112.2 (2012): 2, accessed March 4, 2016, [https://www.academia.edu/1430756/Fiction\\_as\\_a\\_Genre](https://www.academia.edu/1430756/Fiction_as_a_Genre).

32. *Ibid.*, 4.

the public conception of what constitutes ‘non-fiction’ and ‘fiction’ changes over time. While Gore Vidal’s *Narratives of Empire* series, based on the lives of the founding fathers of the United States, is categorised as fiction, Tacitus’s *Annals* and *Histories*, which feature passages written in free indirect style (imagining the thought processes of actual leaders), and invented speeches and battle sequences, are classified as non-fiction histories. At around the same time that Newtonian physics was beginning to establish itself, “historians began to eschew the representations of inner thoughts, invented speeches or battles and the depiction of legendary heroes and fabulous events that had no basis in evidence.”<sup>33</sup> Rather than suggest that historical writing prior to this time should be re-categorised as fiction, Friend argues that “conventions for writing non-fiction history have changed.”<sup>34</sup> This change “appears to have been motivated largely by the developing legal conception of ‘fact’ and its association with evidence in law, leading to a new role for documentation in history and an increasing rejection of any ‘fact’ for which documentation could not be provided.”<sup>35</sup>

Now the conventions appear to be changing back again. In recent years there has been a noticeable move towards the lyric in works formerly considered to be non-fiction, bringing with it a shift in a writer’s priority from the documentation of evidence-based fact to *the relationship between facts*—how facts are combined, re-combined, obfuscated or ignored.<sup>36</sup> In her collection of essays *On Histories and Stories*, A. S. Byatt points out that the majority of historians have spent the twentieth century becoming increasingly self-conscious about the constructedness of history texts. Byatt observes that the “complex self-consciousness about the writing of history itself” has coincided with the historical novel’s renaissance.<sup>37</sup> In her essay ‘Fathers’, Byatt looks in particular at postmodern fiction writers:

I believe that post-modern writers are returning to historical fiction because the idea of writing about the Self is felt to be worked out, or precarious, or because these writers are attracted by the idea that perhaps we have no such thing as an organic, discoverable, single Self. We are perhaps no more than a series of disjunct self-impressions, remembered incidents, shifting bits of knowledge, opinion, ideology and stock responses. We like historical persons because they are unknowable, only partly available to the imagination, and we find this occluded quality attractive. After the disappearance of the Immortal Soul, the disappearance of the developed and coherent Self.<sup>38</sup>

In her essay ‘True Stories and the Facts in Fiction’, Byatt connects historians’ increasing interest in “artfulness” with “fiction’s preoccupation with impossible truthfulness,” and observes that it is as if history and fiction have “changed places in a dance.”<sup>39</sup>

To allow for inconsistencies in the fiction and non-fiction categories, Friend proposes that fiction and non-fiction operate as super-genres, or genres of which the sub-genres ‘crime’

---

33. *Ibid.*, 5.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 10.

36. See John D’Agata, *The Next American Essay* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003), 435–436.

37. A. S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 9.

38. *Ibid.*, 31.

39. *Ibid.*, 98–99.

'historical fiction', 'new journalism', etc. are comprised. She uses the term 'genre' for its non-reductionist flexibility and emphasis on the context in which a text is situated. This context includes reader expectations, the expectations of a writer's professional community (i.e., other writers, editors, publishers, publicists and critics) and the writer's own intentions. Genre, for her purposes, "is a way of classifying representations that guides appreciation."<sup>40</sup> There may be 'standard' features to a genre, and 'contra-standard' features. That a work be 'factual' is a standard feature of the non-fiction genre, but a work may still be perceived as non-fiction and not contain this standard feature if it includes other standard features or variables consistent with that genre.

According to Friend, "when we read a work of non-fiction that turns out to contain elements that have been invented, or does not aim primarily to tell the truth, we are surprised and wonder about what we can believe." What this inclusion of contra-standard features does is "change the conventions of the genre in ways that open up new possibilities."<sup>41</sup> These possibilities might 'collapse down' to define a new genre, as they did for New Journalism after the publication of numerous books inspired by *In Cold Blood*, but there is also the possibility that these contra-standard features might never catch on. Friend suggests that it is possible for a text of indeterminate genre to be *both* fiction and non-fiction in different respects at the same time, or for different reasons. For Friend, the classification of these texts is almost performative in the Butlerian sense: "once we recognise that fiction and non-fiction are genres, we should expect to discover a variety of roles played by these classifications in our experience, understanding and evaluation of particular works."<sup>42</sup> Once again, the active *playing of roles*, even if they are roles imposed upon a text by a reader, becomes a means of negotiating uncertainty.

## THE POSSIBILITY OF ACTUALIST HISTORICAL FICTION

In *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, Susan Strehle clusters together contemporary novels that defy categorisation as exclusively 'realist' or 'metafictive', and argues their case as works of 'actualist' fiction. Actualism is, like realism, concerned with reality external to the fictional world of the text, but a post-quantum reality that is no longer 'realistic'. After quantum physics, our concept of reality "has more energy and mystery, rendering the observer's position more uncertain and more involved, than the solid and rocklike overlook from which the realist surveyed a stable world."<sup>43</sup> Many of the texts which Strehle considers actualist are typically considered postmodern, such as Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, and John Barth's *LETTERS*, while some, such as Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, are more closely aligned with realism, albeit realism composed of interacting, or even conflicting, subjective realities.

---

40. Friend, "Fiction as a Genre," 16.

41. *Ibid.*, 9.

42. *Ibid.*, 18.

43. Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, x. All future page numbers will be given in the text.

Strehle uses the term ‘actual’ as opposed to ‘real’ in order to set the twentieth-century notion of ‘reality’ apart from its nineteenth-century Newtonian precedent. Strehle borrows this distinction from Heisenberg’s discussion of “the dubious reality of particles as mathematical forms”:

Would you call such mathematical forms ‘actual’ or ‘real’? If they express natural laws, that is the central order inherent in material processes, then you must also call them ‘actual,’ for they act, they produce tangible effects, but you cannot call them ‘real,’ because they cannot be described as *res*, as ‘things.’<sup>44</sup>

Strehle’s interest is in fiction that prioritises *interaction* over the static ‘fact’. She is also aware of the performative implications of the term ‘actual,’ writing that “the dual meaning of ‘to act’ as both ‘to make’ and ‘to fake’ gives ‘actualism’ special relevance for a fiction that describes and embodies both sorts of acts” (14).

As a category, actualist fiction is necessarily difficult to define. Strehle writes that “actuality, seen through the kindred lenses of physics and fiction in our times, is *indeterminate*; its meaning cannot be singly or completely determined, because it contains a paradoxical *complementarity*, a doubled difference, within itself” (219). This inner contradiction does not result in the category’s self-annihilation, but opens up possibilities: “Actualist fiction allows for both—and thinking in place of either—or; it creates new models of fictive complementarity where seemingly divergent possibilities, voices, plots, outcomes, and perspectives come together in dialogue” (221).

Despite the ‘indeterminability’ of the actualist category, Strehle does attempt to define her new genre by itemising its typical features. Actualist fiction is “moved by a spirit of play”; it delights in “the peculiar and incongruous blend of various forms”, where “each formal ground becomes relative, incomplete”, producing a “paradoxical complementarity that energises the text” (232; 231; 232). Due to its inherent uncertainties and resistance against resolution, actualist fiction cannot be mastered (226). Its texts “do not foreground a single voice and vantage point but rather set plural voices in motion and conflict” (224). If an actualist text is self-reflexive it is not narcissistic: “The subjective author” is placed “in relation to other, different voices and forces.” If a third-person narrator is employed, “it does not appear to control fates or to force outcomes. Third-person subjective voices ... change in inflection, tone, diction, distance from the material and response to it—and thus abandon the guiding certitude that characterises third-person narration in the realist tradition” (223). Actualist novels will more often than not be written in the present tense, and if past tense is used, there will be a predominance of enlivening gerunds, for “actualistic fiction opens up the past. It presents actions, not as the products of causality, but as processes in a larger field” (230). Actualist novels also “deregulate time” and “energise space,” displacing “characters and readers, making both experience an uncanny loss of bearings” (229). Events become disordered, or if they follow chronological order, continuity is “fractured”; resolution is arbitrary, for “where does an interconnected field conclude?” (228) Strehle accuses historical fiction of trying to restore “unbroken continuity” to the past. If the actualist novel engages with the past, it does

---

44. Heisenberg cited in *ibid.*, 14.

---

not “trace causal lines through time,” or “present events as logical and inevitable outcomes of previous conditions”; instead, these fictions “allow the individual detail its own uncanny energy, unassimilated to history’s larger picture” (226).

What does Strehle’s actualism mean for a novelist interested in engaging not only with uncertainty, possibility, and relative and contradictory subjectivities, but also with *history* and *fact*—with the stories we tell and have told about the *actual* and *real* past? In the twenty-first century, it has become important to stress that causal relationships on the human and non-human level do hold. Fossil fuels *do* accelerate climate change, and when Australia’s federal parliament voted on whether to legalise same-sex marriage in 2012, this vote led to a decision: no. Creating histories—the narrativising of fact—is an important cultural process which endows dispossessed people with agency, and motivates change. Strehle writes that “classical physics persists to this day as a habit of thought inscribing the inquiry into and the discourse about reality in various disciplines and institutions,” but classical laws still apply at the macro level of the physical world and cannot be dismissed as a “habit of thought” (224–225). What attracts the contemporary writer of historical fiction to the uncertainty principle and the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics is precisely its *inability* to overwrite prior systems of thought. Uncertainty and accuracy can coexist in the one system. Objectivity may hold on one level of phenomena, and not hold on another.

For an author of fiction about a real person of indeterminate gender, negotiating possibility and paradox in the territories between genders, genres, truth and invention is a precarious process. In the next section I will turn to other texts by authors who have faced similar conundrums in order to ask: can a text open up possible histories, trouble the unknowns between knowns, embrace contradiction and doubt, and simultaneously argue for the importance of source materials and the known historical fact? And can an author negotiate these paradoxes without inserting herself as a character into the text? Can she turn down the volume of her own voice to let the murmurings of history speak for, and to, themselves?

## PART ONE

### OSCILLATING BETWEEN METAFICTION AND REALISM: UNCERTAINTY IN NOVELS ABOUT 'ACTUAL' PEOPLE AND EVENTS FROM HISTORY

Important to Strehle's argument is the idea that metafiction and realism are diametrically opposed: that metafiction is preoccupied with its own world-making, and realism is so concerned with rendering the 'real' world that it forgets its own art and artifice. Of course, most works in either category could be shown to have features of the other. Realists such as Dickens can hardly be accused of being blind to their own story-telling art, and, likewise, a return to early definitions of metafiction reveal that the category was not so uninterested in the world external to the text as Strehle supposes.

'Metafiction' was first coined in 1970 by William Gass in his essay 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction',<sup>1</sup> and was taken up by literary critics in the 1980s as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality."<sup>2</sup> Following extensive criticism and revision, the term was later re-defined by Mark Currie in 1995 as "a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and takes the border as its subject".<sup>3</sup>

This wave of criticism in the 1980s and early 1990s served a doubled purpose: to insist that all fiction is metafiction, while some works of fiction are more metafictional than others.<sup>4</sup> According to the argument, while metafiction has been an essential aspect of the novel since its inception (by using the term 'novel', a writer draws attention to the fact the manuscript is a work of art, a fiction, though it may be concerned with the real), postmodern fiction written after WWII has featured an ample range of metafictional qualities which tend to point to an

1. William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 25.

2. Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), 2.

3. Mark Currie, *Metafiction* (London and New York: Longman, 1995), 2.

4. Waugh, *Metafiction*, 5: "although the term 'metafiction' might be new, the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself. What I hope to establish during the course of this book is that metafiction is a tendency or function inherent in all novels." See chapter two in Waugh's *Metafiction*, in which she establishes that self-consciousness in nineteenth-century realism and early twentieth-century Modernism are different to late twentieth-century metafiction.

underlying ontological belief that not only fiction, but what we perceive as *reality* is a fictional, linguistic construct.<sup>5</sup>

During this trend in literary criticism, some novelists spoke out against the perceived detrimental side-effects of metafiction on the health and longevity of the novel. Tom Wolfe wrote against the “decadent forms of self-absorption” of metafiction,<sup>6</sup> while in his early essay ‘E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction’ David Foster Wallace wrote of metafiction in the past tense, seeing it as a style of writing that came before, but one that nonetheless left indelible traces of self-consciousness on his generation of writers. Wallace laments that his contemporaries write with “irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule.”<sup>7</sup> He is so despairing of the effects of extreme self-consciousness, he feels the need to call for a new generation of “real literary ‘rebels’” who endorse “single entendre values,” who treat emotion with “reverence and conviction,” who “eschew self-consciousness and fatigue” and “risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs ... accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Credulity.” His parody of what he anticipates to be criticism of this ‘new sincerity’—that it will be deemed “too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic”—sounds similar to standard criticisms of realist fiction.<sup>8</sup> And perhaps this *is* what Wallace is calling for: a return to realism, or at least the objectives of realism: to preference an engagement with character and emotional depth over a questioning of narrative frame.

In his essay, Wallace does not mention any novelists who are aware of the ‘lessons’ of metafiction, and are still attempting to make the return to sincerity he is rallying for. And yet across the Atlantic one year prior to the publication of Wallace’s essay, Hilary Mantel published *A Place of Greater Safety*, a historical novel which used the realist genre to “pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”<sup>9</sup> In an age of fiction-writing that is more aware than ever that verisimilitude and reality are not the same thing (if we ever really doubted the distinction to begin with), Mantel’s novel is an example of how a return to the realist mode might not mean a return to naïveté, but rather a return to immersive story-telling that is aware of, but does not explicitly dwell on, its art and artifice.

## A PLACE OF GREATER SAFETY

Hilary Mantel’s *A Place of Greater Safety* is a historical novel about three instigators of the French Revolution: Camille Desmoulins, George-Jacques Danton, Maximilien Robespierre, and their various personal and political relations. According to A. S. Byatt, the novel is “apparently innocently realist, [however it does] not choose realism unthinkingly, but almost as

5. Ibid., 16: “Metafiction novels ... show not only that the ‘author’ is a concept produced through previous and existing literary and social texts but that what is generally taken to be ‘reality’ is also constructed and mediated in a similar fashion. ‘Reality’ is to this extent ‘fictional’ and can be understood through an appropriate ‘reading’ process.”

6. Tom Wolfe cited in Currie, *Metafiction*, 16.

7. David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (Summer 1993): 171.

8. Ibid., 192–193.

9. Waugh, *Metafiction*, 2.

an act of shocking rebellion against current orthodoxies.”<sup>10</sup> Shortly after its release, reviewers wrote not only of the author’s ambiguous treatment of historical fact, but of the uncertain position this placed her readers in, particularly those who had a desire to learn about the French Revolution. In a review for *The New York Times*, historian and author of eight books on the French Revolution Olivier Bernier wrote that:

as for history itself, it has been assigned an ambiguous role: the main events are real; snatches of dialogue and letters come from authentic sources; as for the rest, Ms Mantel writes airily in an author’s note, ‘anything that seems particularly unlikely is probably true.’ That, together with her sneer at ‘the complaints of pedants,’ leaves her readers in a curiously uncertain position: are we reading history amplified by the empathy of the novelist or fiction dressed up in historical costume?<sup>11</sup>

Bernier does not ask whether the “ambiguous role of history”, or the “uncertain position of the reader” is intentional on Mantel’s part. He presumes, simply, that it is an odd side-effect of Mantel’s ambitious project. By the end of his review Bernier decides that, “in the end we are left to wonder whether more novel and less history might not better suit this author’s unmistakable talent.”<sup>12</sup>

Novelist, journalist and activist Joan Smith, reviewing for *The Independent*, arrived at the opposite conclusion to Bernier’s. Smith scathingly wrote: “on the rare occasions when the book is affecting or exciting, it is because Mantel is relating real events which could hardly fail to move.”<sup>13</sup> Smith, who is not a historian, identifies the book’s greatest weaknesses as its most novelistic features: “an intrusive authorial voice”; “abrupt changes of scene, point of view and even of tense”; and the use of “clever one-liners.”<sup>14</sup> She prefers historian Simon Schama’s non-fiction work *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, writing that “where Simon Schama gave us the French Revolution as human tragedy, Hilary Mantel presents it as up-market soap opera.”<sup>15</sup> However Colin Jones, who is a French history professor of Queen Mary University of London has written in praise of the thoroughness of Mantel’s historical research. In *Film and Fiction for French Historians: A Cultural Bulletin*—a website which aims to “assess the compatibility of fictional representations of the past and historians’ knowledge of it”<sup>16</sup>—Jones writes that he was “stunned and agog: stunned at the novelistic power of the narrative, the deftness of its emplotment and the sharpness of the writing; and agog (in that snooty way we historians can affect) at the thoroughness of [*A Place of Greater Safety*’s] historical grounding.”<sup>17</sup>

10. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, 38.

11. Olivier Bernier, “Guillotine Dreams,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1993, accessed March 4, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/11/specials/mantel-place.html>

12 Ibid.

13. Joan Smith, “The Rough and Tumbrel of History,” *Independent*, September 6, 1992, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/book-review-the-rough-and-tumbrel-of-history-a-place-of-greater-safety-hilary-mantel-viking-pounds-1549781.html>

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. “What is FFFH?,” Liana Vardi, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://h-france.net/fffh/what-is-fffh/>

17. “*A Place of Greater Safety*,” Colin Jones, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://h-france.net/fffh/classics/hilary-mantel-a-place-of-greater-safety/>



Literary scholar and biographer P. N. Furbank, reviewing for *The London Review of Books*, is, like Bernier and Smith, also concerned with not knowing what is “authentic fact” and what is the product of Mantel’s imagination: “we still care deeply about the French Revolution; many of us have not made up our minds about it, indeed are still under its influence; so that how Desmoulins and Robespierre and Danton ‘really’ talked and behaved is a matter of concern for us”.<sup>18</sup> Furbank goes further than Smith, however, and shifts the blame for the book’s failures from Mantel-as-sensationalist to historical-fiction-as-genre when he writes: “Perhaps the whole literary enterprise was impossible. Historical novels, however intelligent or profound, are entertainments. Hence, though one can set one in the Revolution, one cannot write one about this extraordinary event, which is still with us and has not been reduced to the harmless, understood past”.<sup>19</sup> To help him define what he perceives as the principal problem of historical fiction, Furbank quotes Henry James’s famous letter of 1901, written in response to a historical novel his friend Sarah Orne Jewett had written and sent to him for comment:

The ‘historical novel’ is, for me, condemned, even in cases of labour as delicate as yours, to a fatal cheapness, for the simple reason that the difficulty of the job is inordinate and that a mere escamotage, in the interest of ease, and of the abysmal public naivety, becomes inevitable. You may multiply the little facts that may be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints, as much as you like—the *real* thing is almost impossible to do, and in its essence the whole effect is as naught: I mean the invention, the representation of the old CONSCIOUSNESS, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals in whose mind half the things that make ours, that make the modern world, were non-existent. You have to think with your modern apparatus a man, a woman or rather fifty—whose own thinking was intensely otherwise conditioned, you have to simplify back by an amazing *tour de force*—and even then it’s all humbug.<sup>20</sup>

Furbank’s primary criticism of historical fiction, then, is the inability contemporary writers have to capture a zeitgeist they have not experienced, for readers who have not lived through it. And his primary concern with Mantel’s novel (apart from its genre) is—as it was with Smith—her intruding, somewhat amused authorial voice: “This narrator is evidently an aristo, or at least impersonating one; elsewhere he or she is a statistician, textbook historian or troubled man in the street. But the question troubles us, why does it all have to be so ‘amusing’? Who is this narrator, and what is he so superior *about*?”<sup>21</sup> What Furbank fails to recognise is that Mantel’s intrusive, shape-shifting and ‘amused’ narrator is her most successful means of overcoming his (and James’s) problem with the historical novel as a genre. This blind spot in Furbank’s argument reveals another, broader oversight. In suggesting that historical novels cannot be written *about* the times in which they are set, he either implies that this is possible in other genres, or ignores a series of broader questions: can *anyone* write

18. P. N. Furbank, “Falling for Desmoulins,” *London Review of Books* 14.16 (1992), accessed 4 March 2016, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v14/n16/pn-furbank/falling-for-desmoulins>

19. Ibid.

20. Henry James cited in *ibid.*

21. Ibid.

authoritatively about the “extraordinary event” of the French revolution—historian, novelist, or otherwise? Would the emotionally distant, ‘objective’ tone of a history textbook make writing about the French revolution *actually* more achievable, or only *seem* more achievable? As Stacie Friend argues, much of a text’s success is achieved by the reader’s expectations of its given genre. For a novel to claim to be as fact-based as a work of non-fiction is contra-standard, and this is perhaps why so many critics didn’t know what to make of *A Place of Greater Safety*’s paradoxical partnering of novelistic style and assertions of truth.

In the first quarter of *A Place of Greater Safety*, Mantel’s narrator is established as partial, protean and omniscient. At moments the voice slips into second person: “New Year. You go out into the streets and you think it’s here: the crash at last, the collapse, the end of the world.”<sup>22</sup> Despite these fleeting moments, the narrative is told primarily in third person, from the shifting perspectives of Mantel’s various characters. A quarter of the way into the novel Mantel introduces a new device, and formats her dialogue as a play script, with all action written as stage directions (198). Later, she writes for the first time in first person, from the point of view of Gabrielle Danton, the wife of one of her central protagonists (280). She continues to slip in and out of various modes, perspectives and points of view, at one point writing as Paris’s executioner (724–725). Occasionally she shifts her point of view without warning. Take, for example, this shift from third person to first person plural, as Lucile Desmoulins fights with her husband Camille:

[Lucile] dragged herself from his grasp, ran into the bedroom and slammed the door. Her chest heaved, her heart rose and throbbed in her throat. With all the desperate passions in our heads and bodies, one day these walls will split, one day this house will fall down. There will be soil and bones and grass, and they will read our diaries to find out what we were. (722)

With this shift in point of view, comes a sudden implication, a rupturing of time (does “our” include the reader in this case? will our diaries also become the stuff of history?), and an intensification of feeling. The constant shifting, the inhabiting of incidental characters, creates a sense of unobtainable largesse, but also an uneasiness, a motion sickness, a sense that the ground is never stable: Mantel’s Parisians could rise up on a whim at any moment; today’s hero could be tomorrow’s criminal; the narrator could (and does) turn on you, the reader. But, most importantly, Mantel’s slippery narrator can duck and weave around her source materials: she can bring a scene to mimetic life, but recount others with a sharp, twentieth-century sense of irony. Mantel’s ambiguous, adaptable narrator tries literally every point of view available to her, and in pushing literature to its technical limits makes the reader acutely aware that this is a literary exercise, that it is a *version* of history, but it is fluid, active, engaged and stubbornly undecided. Mantel seems to be suggesting that it is (and should be) impossible for Furbank, or any of us, “to make up our minds” about the French revolution.

Likewise, when Mantel’s prose gives way and the drama unfolds as a play script, the reader is offered an account of the French revolution that is not pretending to be anything other

---

22. Hilary Mantel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), 160. All future page numbers will be given in the text.

than *a version*. The break is not as abrupt as it might be, perhaps because the momentum and frothiness of Mantel's prose has been building towards a baroque excess that demands a shift or release. This shift into a heightened theatrical mode is set up by the previous scene: a political meeting which takes place in a theatre. Mantel also foreshadows the formal shift by giving Camille Desmoulins an out-of-body jolt when he sees the Comte de Mirabeau as if for the first time: "Camille felt his heart slow. He glanced over his shoulder at the retreating Mirabeau. For a second, he saw the Comte in quite a different light: a tawdry grandee, in some noisy melodrama. He wished to leave the theatre" (197). With Camille's re-envisioning of Mirabeau, the groundwork is laid for the following scene to focus on Mirabeau as precisely the kind of "tawdry grandee" one might find in the script of a melodrama.

One paragraph before the switch to script form, Mantel has the Comte instruct his "three Genevan slaves": "Whatever I say next, write it down." (198) The scene is prefaced with an image of three men documenting what is about to happen next, like playwrights in a rehearsal room:

The Genevan slaves sat about with scraps of paper resting on books propped on their knees. The Comte's papers covered every surface that might have been used as a writing desk. From time to time they exchanged glances, like the knowing veteran revolutionaries they were. The Comte strode about, gesturing with a sheaf of notes. (198)

In this description, some of the theatrical customs that might be natural in the previous theatre-cum-meeting room have seeped into the home of Mirabeau. The Genevans have to use their knees as improvised writing desks. There are no *actual* writing desks in the room, only surfaces that "might" have been writing desks. When the Genevans exchange glances they are doing so "*like* the knowing veteran revolutionaries *they were*"—they are performing themselves. The Comte "strides" and "gestures". Nothing in this scene is 'authentic', everything is improvised by characters playing the roles expected of them, possibly expected *by* them, too. They revel in their own theatricality. Mantel may have deemed such moments of baroque excess as appropriate formal strategies through which to comment upon the downfall and aftermath of a late baroque French monarchy and aristocracy. Alternatively, such choices could be self-consciously Brechtian: a heightening of theatricality employed to jolt readers out of a naïve immersion into the constructed world of the novel and see it for what it is—a re-enactment. In an article in *The New Yorker*, Larissa MacFarquhar suggests that Mantel set out to write a Brechtian novel:

But while with facts she was cautious, with form she was experimental. She tried everything. She read a lot of plays, and she loved Brecht, so she thought maybe she could write a Brechtian novel. She liked writing dialogue, it turned out, and much of the novel came out in that form ... In some places, the prose disappeared altogether, and she wrote in the form of a play.<sup>23</sup>

While Joan Smith sees Mantel's formal play, appropriation of genre tropes and script-style dialogue as a "lapse" or momentary loss of judgement, closer scrutiny of Mantel's novel

---

23. Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Dead Are Real: Hilary Mantel's Imagination," *New Yorker*, October 15, 2012, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/10/15/the-dead-are-real>

would reveal that such “artfulness” may have been indicative of a novelist more aware of her role as manipulator and animator of history than first thought. As Byatt has likewise observed: “Although Mantel’s novel . . . is ‘conventional’ on the surface, any writer looking closely at the narrative choices made on each page, the juxtapositions of events, the gaps, the angle of narration, will find many new and admirable things.”<sup>24</sup>

As Byatt promises, close scrutiny does reveal that Mantel’s fiction-world is constructed from fine layers of fact and fiction kneaded into one another. As we read we discover Mantel has written a novel (a work of fiction) thoroughly supported by fact, in order to show how a handful of (actual) people *invented* a revolution that became so real it took on agency of its own and eventually destroyed them. As Vergniaud observes (via Lucile Desmoulins, via Mantel): “the Revolution, like Saturn, is devouring its own children.” (731) It is almost as if *A Place of Greater Safety* is a realist novel attempting to capture a metafictional world.

Mantel’s prose is self-conscious, but it is not Mantel who is self-conscious of her ability to write historical fiction. Rather it is her characters, “poseurs or not,” (29) who are excruciatingly self-conscious of their roles as creators of history, and as admirers of people they have read about (Rousseau, the Romans) and are now actively emulating. Early in the novel Mantel uses a flash of prolepsis to plant in the reader’s mind one of her primary thematic preoccupations: “Maximilien Robespierre, 1793: ‘History is fiction.’” (29) At this point the narrative is concerned with Desmoulins and Robespierre as school boys in 1774. Taken out of the context of its time and original source, this statement of Robespierre’s is left for the reader to interpret in a variety of ways. One interpretation might be that Robespierre has a pessimistic view of history: that up until this point it has been falsified. Another might be that the young Robespierre is issuing an imperative: if all history is fiction, then we had better start inventing it. This latter interpretation is emphatically supported by Mantel’s characters throughout the text, such as when Lucile Desmoulins comments to Danton:

do you know, Georges-Jacques, I sometimes think I may have fantasised the Revolution completely—it seems too unlikely to be true. And Camille—what if he is something I have simply fabricated, just a phantom I have called up out of the depth of my nature, a ghostly second self who works out my discontents?” (641)

Mantel’s characters are frequently aware of themselves and each other, not only as creators of history, but as created people—individuals who have self-consciously modelled themselves on characters from books, plays and paintings. Fabre (a writer) tells Desmoulins “you talk like somebody in a book” (162). Later, when Manon Roland arrives in Paris from Lyon and introduces herself, Brissot thinks “she talks like a novel” (330). What starts out as a trait observed by characters critical of others, later becomes a trait characters observe within themselves. Mantel has Marat, whose death was famously captured in *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David, explicitly (and improbably) aware of his fate as the subject of a painting: “Camille sat. He tried to avoid looking at Marat. ‘Yes, aesthetic, aren’t I?’ Marat said. ‘A work of art. I ought to be in an exhibition. The number of people who come tramping through, I feel like an exhibit anyway.’” (672–673) Once the revolution is well under way, Danton is

24. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories*, 55.

“aware, these days, of his pseudo-refined barrister’s drawl, of the expressions that go with it; and of his other voice, his street voice, just as much the product of cultivation.” (497) Some characters perform themselves so well they eventually forget they are performing at all. When Lucille Desmoulins remembers meeting her husband for the first time, she re-writes history, and believes it:

When I was twelve, Camille came to the house. I was committed to him the first time I saw him.

Her life is rewriting itself for her; she believes this. (760)

In this moment Mantel shifts from the first to the third person without the use of speech marks or any other mark of clear delineation. Where does Lucile-as-self-observer and Lucile-as-self-author begin and end? Lucile, it seems, is quite at peace with troubling these boundaries. When Anne Theroigne complains that her actions have been misrepresented, Lucile says:

The thing is, Anne—you must have realised by now—since the Bastille fell, it doesn’t matter what you actually did, it’s what people say you did. You can’t pick the past apart in this way, it doesn’t avail you. Once you start to live in the public eye people attribute actions and words to you, and you have to live with that. If they say you rode astride a cannon, then I’m afraid you did. (440)

Maximilien Robespierre, the reclusive, hard-working idealist, is given a more complex treatment. The self-aware performativity of others is used as a point of comparison to Robespierre’s supposed authenticity: “Robespierre has only one voice, rather flat, unemphatic, ordinary; he’s never in his life seen the need to pretend” (497)—and yet soon after this moment Robespierre becomes “conscious now of eyes upon him: Robespierre acts. Or, Robespierre does not act. Robespierre sits still and watches them watching him” (514). This feeling of Robespierre’s is later grotesquely physicalised when he is taken in by the dotting Duplay family, and surrounded by portraits of himself. When his fellow revolutionaries come to discuss politics, they note that he sits silently; that “the original seemed no more than an item in the display” (632). Even if Robespierre started out with no notion that he was performing himself, his awareness of his constructedness was ultimately forced upon him by admirers who believed they had such a grasp of who he was (either as a subject in a painting, or as a character in a pamphlet) that any notion of a *real* Robespierre fades away. The following scene, rich with dramatic irony, shows how Robespierre’s desire to “efface [himself] from history” is directly at odds with what is happening around him—he is becoming a hero, easily recognisable on the street, and years later he will be seen as the kind of tyrant he would like, at this point, to depose:

‘I sometimes think that the fading out of the individual personality is what one should desire, not the status of a hero—a sort of effacement of oneself from history. The entire record of the human race has been falsified, it has been made up by bad governments to suit themselves, by kings and tyrants to make them look good. This idea of history as made by great men is quite nonsensical, when you look at it from the point of view of

the people. The real heroes are those who have resisted tyrants, and it is in the nature of tyranny not only to kill those who oppose it but to wipe their names out of the record, to obliterate them, so that resistance seems impossible.’

A passer-by hesitated, stared. ‘Excuse me—’ he said. ‘Good citizen—are you Robespierre?’

Robespierre didn’t look at the man. ‘Do you understand what I say about heroes? There is no place for them. Resistance to tyrants means oblivion. I will embrace that oblivion. My name will vanish from the page.’

‘Good citizen, forgive me,’ the patriot said doggedly.

Eyes rested on him briefly. ‘Yes, I’m Robespierre,’ he said. He put his hand on Citizen Desmoulin’s arm. ‘Camille, history is fiction.’ (565–566)

Here, his comment that “history is fiction” is repeated, and given an imagined context. We now understand what Robespierre means by the comment: that the entire record of the human race has been falsified, and yet this sentiment is troubled by the ironic fact that he (who aims to embrace obliteration) will be remembered by history as both a hero and a tyrant. By the end of the novel, Robespierre is no longer in control of the collectively imagined character attached to his name. He soon becomes no more than another version of himself, which is later (outside the world of the novel) forgotten in favour of historical interpretations of him as a puritanical despot.

Frederic Jameson, in ‘The Historical Novel Today, Or, Is It Still Possible?’ argues that it is Mantel’s use of realism that saves Robespierre from such representations. To Jameson, Mantel’s novel “functions as an intervention into the political situation and not merely a representation of the past”, and that “with this [humanising] intervention in the portrayal of Robespierre, his political program can now again be taken seriously”.<sup>25</sup> Jameson argues that Mantel makes Robespierre human by casting him as a friend and a lover, and in juxtaposing him against a more caricatured version of Camille Desmoulin, but I would argue that by showing how character (and, by extension, history) creates and replicates itself via a series of performed representations, Mantel reveals how caricature is a very human and everyday *act and aspect of being*, rather than a dehumanised, immobile *product* of badly-written history. Through revealing the constructedness of Robespierre, and his and others’ desire to construct themselves, Mantel makes him believable again.

Mantel ensures she gives voice to her protagonists by extensively excerpting from their own writing, when possible, and the accounts of others who had met or witnessed events in which they were involved. She limits her role as manipulator and mediator by simply selecting and arranging these materials without analysis. Her interest is not so much in the writer as manipulator and creator of the past, but rather in her protagonists’ creation and manipulation of themselves and each other. If she had insisted upon her role as ‘the’ creator of her version of the French revolution by naming herself as narrator, her protagonists would have been emphasised as being her creations alone, and any investigation into their own roles as creators and manipulators of history would have been violently overshadowed. Mantel uses “the account of Thomas Blaikie, a Scottish gardener employed at the French court,” to depict the climax of the riot: “Many of these anthropophages passed in the Street and stopped to show us

25. Frederic Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2015), 276; 278.

parts of the Suisses they had misacred some of whom I knew ... every one seemed to glory in what he had done and to show even their fury on the dead body by cutting them or even tearing their clothes as monuments of triumph ..." (479) By allowing her source materials to 'take over' the narration, Mantel successfully achieves what Strehle suggests is a feature of actualist fiction: she places her authorial voice "in relation to other, different voices and forces."<sup>26</sup>

This interaction of voices and forces does not result in the extreme relativism and disavowal of objectivity that postmodern metafiction is often accused of. In her interview with Larissa MacFarquhar for *The New Yorker*, Mantel has admitted a strong desire to get the objective facts of her story right:

There's one whole side of my nature that makes me the least likely novelist in the world: the person who insists on getting the historical facts all lined up, and who feels that there's immense security in a good card index.<sup>27</sup>

In the same article Mantel says more emphatically still:

I cannot describe to you what revulsion it inspires in me when people play around with the facts. If I were to distort something just to make it more convenient or dramatic, I would feel I'd failed as a writer. If you understand what you're talking about, you should be drawing the drama out of real life, not putting it there, like icing on a cake.<sup>28</sup>

While her distaste for factual distortion appears to be as pronounced as any non-fiction historian's, her method of negotiating the historical fact in novel form is dramatically different. She permits herself the liberty of emotionally and sensorially inhabiting her characters, and has no problem with disrupting the "unbroken continuity" that frustrates Strehle about history by introducing new significant characters well into the narrative, or switching to a first-person inhabitation of her characters a third of the way into the book.<sup>29</sup> Rather than conflate characters to suit any preconceived notion of a 'realist' narrative arc, she provides her readers with a list of no less than one hundred and fifty-one characters at the beginning of the book, and then allows her narrator to shift between them, blurring their boundaries in the process. Though Mantel has set a very strict constraint on herself—"Almost all the characters in [the novel] are real people and it is closely tied to historical facts—as far as those facts are agreed" (ix)—by adhering to such a constraint, other aspects of Mantel's artistry are liberated. She allows herself the freedom to write flashes of her narrative as a play, to insert excerpts from historical documents that she can work with or against, to swirl through the perspectives of over one hundred and fifty characters, and in doing so destabilise some of the facts she felt she had pinned down in the first place. As Mantel writes in her author's note at the beginning of the book: "I have had many arguments with myself about what history really is. But you must state a case, I think, before you can plead against it" (ix); and later: "I purvey my own version of events, but facts change according to your viewpoint." (x) There is a sense that over

26. Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, 223.

27. Mantel in MacFarquhar, "The Dead Are Real".

28. Ibid.

29. See Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, 226.

the six years it took Mantel to write *A Place of Greater Safety*, and the eleven subsequent years it took to get the book published, she saw that the “facts” she had “all lined up” pertained to a fluid, revolutionary present, which in turn became an uncertain past, restlessly shifting between multiple true versions of itself.

## MASON & DIXON

If *A Place of Greater Safety* is more realist than metafictional, Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1997) is more metafictional than realist. However I would argue that both novels oscillate between the two categories, and in so doing might be better understood as works of a revised version of *actualist* historical fiction in which the ‘objective’ historical fact is both troubled and revered.

*Mason & Dixon* is directly concerned with how uncertainty and probability trouble historical representation. The novel's narrator, Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, uses the construction of the boundary line between Maryland and Pennsylvania by English astronomer Charles Mason and surveyor Jeremiah Dixon as the primary narrative thread conjoining often-ridiculous explorations of large ideas: the unreliable foundations of received history; the tension between the represented and the real; and the means through which multiple possible “subjunctive” worlds may collapse down into singular, concrete, and mapped territories. While Pynchon addresses themes typical of postmodern fiction, like Mantel, his focus is on actual history outside the linguistic play of his novel. He engages with actual historical sources, blurs them into his own narration, and avoids overt self-reflexivity, allowing his thematic concerns to inform the structure of his novel, and rendering the text, as Jeffrey Staiger has observed, “implicitly” metafictional.<sup>30</sup>

The novel opens as family gather around (the fictional) Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke during a Philadelphian winter shortly after the funeral of (the real) Charles Mason in 1786. Cherrycoke has been staying in the home of his sister Elizabeth and her merchant husband Mr LeSpark on the proviso that he keep their children occupied. The youngest members of his audience—twins Pitt and Pliny—request a “Tale about America . . . with Indians in it, and Frenchmen.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the reverend begins the story of Mason and Dixon and their “ultimately meaningless” work “putting a line straight through the heart of the Wilderness, eight yards wide and due west, in order to separate two Proprietorships, granted when the World was yet feudal and but eight years later to be nullified by the War for Independence” (8).

Within the first few pages of *Mason & Dixon* it becomes clear that Pynchon's self-awareness as a manipulator of history has informed his stylistic choices. The narrator's own anonymous, omniscient narrator communicates in a parody of eighteenth-century digressive,

30. Jeffrey Staiger, “James Wood's Case against ‘Hysterical Realism’ and Thomas Pynchon,” *The Antioch Review* 66.4 (2008): 645: “Every bit as self-conscious about writing as the purveyors of the overt, cheekier metafiction of the era that now seems dated, Pynchon fashioned a style in which the authorial self-consciousness is internalized, a kind of fiction that is implicitly metafictional”.

31. Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 7. All future page numbers will be given in the text.



playful novels such as *Tom Jones* or *Tristram Shandy*, capitalising random nouns, and nesting clauses within clauses of already-long sentences. This same narrator, however, shares a late twentieth-century knowledge of Coca-Cola flavours (evidenced by the choice of the reverend's name). And so, through the use of anachronism, Pynchon side-steps the potential anxieties of the realist historical novelist raised by Henry James. Instead of being stymied by the issue of how to render invisible the gap between twentieth- and eighteenth-century consciousnesses, he simply points to the gap, and laughs. In turning this gap into a source of humour, Pynchon makes clear his intentions *not* to transport his readers into a facsimile of eighteenth-century America, but to present a version (or versions) of eighteenth-century America, as imagined by a twentieth-century author aware of the historical events that have transpired in the two intervening centuries. Pynchon makes this gap in time one of his primary areas of concern: how *might* American history *have been different*, had Mason and Dixon (and others) been aware of other choices they could have made?

Pynchon's next metafictional move is to make the reader acutely aware that the narrator of Mason and Dixon's journey, the Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke, is unreliable. The reverend is introduced as having a propensity for "Herodotic" tales (presumably historical stories liable to give way to the fantastic) (7), but the text also signals that his stories will be especially tailored for an audience of children who have made special requests to hear about Indians and Frenchmen. When the reverend is reminded by the twins that he is the "family outcast" and that the family "pay him to stay away" (9–10), the reverend admits he has spent time in gaol, before being branded insane and exiled from Britain for anonymously posting public messages of crimes he had observed "by the Stronger against the Weaker" (9). As the reverend continues his story, he drinks "beakers full" of brandy (105), further compromising the reliability of his tale, and the reader is frequently reminded that the reverend's story is unsupported by reliable evidence when the nested history is interrupted by complaints and questions from the reverend's audience—primarily the reverend's fact-focused brother-in-law, Uncle Ives, but also the disbelieving twins Pitt and Pliny. The reverend himself admits, before even beginning his tale, that he is not only a charlatan reverend, but possibly senile, and definitely untrustworthy:

'After years wasted,' the Rev'd commences, 'at perfecting a *parsonical Disguise*,—grown old in the service of an Impersonation that never took more than a Handful of actor's tricks,—past remembering those Yearnings for Danger, past all that ought to have been, but never had a Hope of becoming, have I beach'd upon these Republican Shores,—stoven, dismayed, imbecile with age,—an untrustworthy Remembrancer for whom the few events yet rattling within a broken memory must provide the only comfort now remaining to him,—' (8)

In the introductory pages of *Mason & Dixon*, Pynchon's readers are made aware that the nested, supposedly true history of Mason and Dixon will be skewed according to the biases of the possibly insane, politically subversive, exiled narrator and the tastes of his audience.

To further destabilise the authority of his history, Pynchon nests worlds within worlds, and stories within stories—though the borderlands between each world are liable to twist, like a Möbius strip, bending one world into another. These worlds are fictional-historical (the

world Mason and Dixon inhabit); the fictional-within-the-fictional (the world of *The Ghastly Fop*—a serialised ‘captive narrative’ which is read by the reverend’s niece and nephews in the frame narrative, and ruptures into the world of Mason and Dixon); the world of the subjunctive (what *might have* happened to Mason and Dixon had different choices been made—as in, the scene which precedes the comment “All subjunctive, of course,—*had* young Mason gone to his father, this *might have been* the conversation likely to result” [208]); the world of Mason’s mood-distorted memories (various contradicting memories of how and when he met his wife, and of being trapped in the eleven days struck from the Gregorian calendar, etc.); the worlds of represented history (the ‘commemorative’ ending to Mason and Dixon’s journey; the various incarnations of the Black Hole of Calcutta); and the world of the ‘real’ Mason’s diary, which is seamlessly blurred into Pynchon’s prose. All of these, and other sometimes-diverging, sometimes-nested, occasionally-factual ontological realms are framed by the allegorical world of the reverend and his audience. When Pynchon writes that the reverend had recently been waking in the middle of the night “convinc’d that ’twas he who had been haunting Mason,—that like a shade with a grievance, he had expected Mason, but newly arriv’d at Death, to help him with something” (8), he emphasises that it is story-tellers, with their moral objectives and biases, who haunt history, and not the other way around.

Pynchon makes no attempts to conceal the allegorical function of *Mason & Dixon*’s frame narrative. The Reverend implies he chooses the stories he narrates to the family for their “moral usefulness” (7), and the same could be said of the reverend’s anonymous narrator, as the reverend’s world is populated not so much with characters as points of view of history adorned with names and character traits, chosen to illustrate Pynchon’s own morally motivated discourse on history. The reverend’s anachronistic name “Cherrycoke” suggests that his perspective will be influenced by twentieth-century sensibilities. His imagination is effervescent; he is unburdened by a sense of allegiance to fact, but nonetheless motivated by a moral desire to remember or re-imagine the forgotten threads of history. At one point he likens history to a dance (75), but at another he is witness to the room filling with “the Black servants, the Indian poor, the Irish runaways, the Chinese Sailors, the overflow’d from the mad Hospital, all unchosen Philadelphia” (757). His nephew, Ethelmer (possibly named after 2-Hydroxyethyl Mercaptan, a destructive compound used to denature proteins, causing them to lose their structure<sup>32</sup>) is a university student said, by Cherrycoke, to “proceed unerringly to the Despair at the Core of History” (75). Ethelmer might, then, represent a postmodern, poststructuralist point of view. Ethelmer’s cousin, Tenebrae, shares her name with a Christian religious service known for its gradual snuffing out of candles (‘Tenebrae’ coming from the Latin for ‘shadows’ and ‘darkness’).<sup>33</sup> She is drawn to the occluded, Romantic and mysterious aspects of history, so much so that the Reverend says: “You dark girl. Must all be Enigmata?” (246) Her younger, energetic brothers, known for their constant “carefree Assaults” (5), are not unconsciously named after statesmen and politicians: England’s Pitt the Younger and

32. Spencer Thiel, e-mail message to Thomas Pynchon e-mail list, January 7, 1998, accessed 4 March 2016, <https://www.waste.org/mail/?list=pynchon-l&month=9801&msg=22622>

33. Tenebrae’s actions or perceptions are often performed in relation to candlelight. Her nostril “flares into pink illumination as Pitt’s Taper sets alight the central Lanthorn of the Orrery” (95); later she “peers thro’ the candlelight” at her cousin (106). When her brothers go to bed, she “brings in fresh candles” (316).

Elder, and Rome's Pliny the Younger and Elder. Their father's name, Mr LeSpark, likely points to the flammable line of work that made him rich—munitions trading<sup>34</sup>—while Mr LeSpark's brother and Ethelmer's father, an attorney known as Uncle Ives, is most likely named after St Ives, one of two Catholic patron saints of the legal profession. These characters, amongst others, represent different positions in a moral conundrum—how should history be told?—for which Mason and Dixon's journey, despite being an event that actually happened, becomes the metaphor.

At the heart of this conundrum is the often fraught relationship between factual accuracy and imaginative invention in the telling of history. Uncle Ives, with the twins occasionally in tow, argues the case for factual accuracy. When the Reverend mentions a letter Mason wrote to Dixon but decided not to send, the narrative is interrupted with:

“Just a moment,” Pitt says.

“You saw this document?” inquires Pliny.

“Good Lads!” cries Uncle Ives, blessing each with a Pistole ... (146)

Having rewarded the twins' skepticism with cash, the fact-focused lawyer, Uncle Ives, re-enforces his antagonism towards a narrator prone to imaginative embellishment. Earlier, when the reverend admitted he was not present during Mason's time in St Helena, Uncle Ives interrupted: “Then how are we ever to know what happen'd to the three of 'm upon that little-known Island?” (105) The reverend and his nephew Ethelmer, however, often argue the case *against* a reliance upon facts as a basis for history. The reverend is quoted as having written:

Facts are the Play-things of lawyers,—Tops and Hoops, forever a-spin ... Alas the Historian may indulge no such idle Rotating. History is not Chronology, for that is left to lawyers,—nor is it Remembrance, for Remembrance belongs to the People. History can as little pretend to the Veracity of the one, as claim the Power of the other ... (349)

And in defence of his reverend uncle's distrust of facts, Ethelmer claims that history “needs rather to be tended lovingly and honourably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government” (350). Pynchon delights in the opposition he creates between the family members, and the tension is never resolved. In refusing to decide who has the ‘right’ perspective on history, he creates a fiction-world that can accommodate, and is indeed built upon, contradiction.

In a rare public letter he wrote in support of Ian McEwan after he was accused of plagiarising a WWII memoir in his book *Atonement*, Pynchon gives us a glimpse into how he treats the historical “fact” when writing historical fiction:

Oddly enough, most of us who write historical fiction do feel some obligation to ac-

---

34. “Mr LeSpark made his Fortune years before the War, selling weapons to French and British, Settlers and Indians alike” (31).

curacy. It is that Ruskin business about “a capacity responsive to the claims of fact, but unoppressed by them.” Unless we were actually there, we must turn to people who were, or to letters, contemporary reporting, the Internet until, with luck, we can begin to make a few things of our own up.<sup>35</sup>

Although Pynchon’s sarcastic “oddly enough” implies he believes it should be obvious that writers of historical fiction feel some obligation to accuracy, such a belief may seem atypical of a novelist known as a “fabulator.”<sup>36</sup> However, when we consider that the inclusion of his typically absurd anecdotes may, in the case of *Mason & Dixon*, be accurate representations of the popular hearsay of the new Republic, his assertion seems less incongruent with his aesthetic. At one moment in the novel a man named R. C. swallows a perpetual-motion watch in a fit of fury at not knowing how the watch worked (321). A “real” R. C. was reported in historical documents to have done just this, and died with the watch still in his stomach—its ticking could supposedly be heard if the listener pressed his or her ear to the grave.<sup>37</sup> Pynchon, then, treats his source materials—whether, to a twentieth century viewpoint, their claims seem plausible or not—as reporting what might have actually happened, as it gives him, and his readers, an insight into what was deemed plausible in eighteenth-century America. Their unreferenced juxtaposition beside absurd inventions of Pynchon’s—a journey to the centre of the hollow earth, human-sized conscious vegetables and a talking dog—has readers question, even for a fleeting moment, if these more ridiculous inventions might have been possible in a time so far removed from their own, suggesting that “Pynchon prefers a philosophy of history which opens up possibilities, rather than closes them down.”<sup>38</sup>

Critics such as Charles Clerc have suggested that “Among other facts about the novel, the protagonists’ main progress in America follows the *Mason and Dixon Journal* ... rather faithfully’ and so, ‘for all its playfulness, its many twists and turns, the novel remains at heart historical.’”<sup>39</sup> For Pynchon, an “obligation to accuracy” does not necessarily mean an obligation to history as it happened, but rather history as it was recorded by the people it happened to. In aligning himself with Ruskin’s quote, Pynchon implies that he, too, does not assert that authors have an obligation to ‘facts,’ but rather the “claims of fact”—as though facts were arguments, and not indisputable, immovable ‘things.’ And Pynchon (via Ruskin) does not suggest that it is the novelist’s responsibility to report these “claims of fact,” but to be “responsive” to them, and “unoppressed” by them. As Clerc and, later, Savvas have pointed out, large sections of Mason’s journals and field notes are blended in with Pynchon’s prose, though the reader would not necessarily know where these transcriptions begin and end, as he incorporates,

35. Thomas Pynchon cited in “Thomas Pynchon on Plagiarism”, Letters of Note, accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2010/08/thomas-pynchon-on-plagiarism.html>

36. Robert Scholes as cited in Staiger, “James Wood’s Case against ‘Hysterical Realism,’” 645.

37. Katherine Hume, “*Mason & Dixon*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman and Brian McHale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 68, note 3.

38. Theo J. Savvas, “Pynchon Plays Dice: *Mason & Dixon* and Quantum History,” *Literature and History* 20.2 (2011): 52–53.

39. Charles Clerc as cited in Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds, introduction to *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon’s Mason & Dixon: Eighteenth-Century Contexts, Postmodern Observations*, ed. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 17.

extends, and writes through his source.<sup>40</sup> Pynchon's obligation to accuracy could mean an obligation to *interacting with*, as opposed to *capturing* the popular consciousness of the time, in all its sensational, imaginative, and borderline insane fabulousness.

While we know that Pynchon has been careful to include and be faithful to historical "claims of fact", we also know that Pynchon disagrees with Uncle Ives's belief that "facts are facts" and that "no one has time, for more than one Version of the Truth," (350) because in *Mason & Dixon* versions of the truth abound. Chapter seventy-three of the novel presents an alternate ending to Mason and Dixon's final days in America. In an earlier chapter the astronomer and surveyor finish the line at the Native American warrior path as they had been warned to do. In the "commemorative" version of the pair's final years, in which people are performed or "play'd" and music can be heard "from some invisible source", Mason and Dixon return to the westernmost point of their line, and continue further west past the warrior path, to cross the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. (706) In this version, the two discover the new planet Uranus, and devise a way to do the seemingly impossible: "inscribe a Visto upon the Atlantick Sea" (712). The following chapter commences with the more probable version of their final years, but still begins with the cautious inclusion of the adverb 'perhaps': "Perhaps all was not as simple as that,— ..." (718) In the final chapters real obituaries are referred to, but are only useful in showing how little is known, and thus how no one version can be deemed conclusive:

To speak of the final seven years, between Dixon's death and Mason's, is to speculate, to uncertain avail. Obituaries mention a long descent, 'suffering for several years, melancholy aberrations of mind.' His illness at the end was never stipulated. Yet 'tis possible, after all, down here, to die of Melancholy. (761–762)

Two different versions of how Mason meets his wife are also presented side-by-side. Chapter Sixteen begins with the following comment, destabilising what will proceed: "Here is what Mason tells Dixon of how Rebekah and he first met, Not yet understanding the narrative lengths Mason will go to, to avoid betraying her, Dixon believes ev'ry word ..." (167) What follows is a scene reminiscent of Monty Python's Flying Circus, with Rebekah saving the young Mason from a giant rogue wheel of cheese in Gloucestershire. When Uncle Ives interrupts to remind the reverend that there are no records of Rebekah in Gloucestershire, the twins reply: "Unless ghosts are double,— '— one walking, the other still'" (171) Another version of Rebekah—her double, or perhaps one of many multiples—meets Mason quite differently. According to the Rebekah remembered by Mason, she recounts to her friend how she was matched with a picture or *representation* of Mason presented to her by the East India Company, and subsequently married to him in the company chapel (186). To this version of Rebekah—herself a representation in Mason's memory—the *real* Mason does not live up to his representation. In a world governed by the East India Company, appearances are literally everything. Of the two versions of how Mason and Rebekah met, both are de-stabilised and neither is given primacy. The first is prefaced by the suggestion that Mason might be going to "narrative lengths", and the second is remembered from an overheard conversation between

---

40. Savvas, "Pynchon Plays Dice," 52.

Rebekah and another woman. No other version is put forward, and the reader is left to believe, or disbelieve, both.

Why does Pynchon revel in creating multiple versions of events? If we exchange the word 'gender' for 'history' in the following text of Judith Butler's, we arrive at what could be a description of Pynchon's interactive approach to historiography: "Gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed."<sup>41</sup> Likewise, we could consider history to be performative; a doing. The subject—the past—does not entirely preexist the deed—the writing of history—as the writers of history make (and re-make) people and events influenced by the cultural bias of their day, for a contemporaneous audience. In this case, history "becomes" in the temporal intersection between the now abstract subject, the writer's ideas of the subject, the reader's ideas of the subject, and all their conscious and unconscious influences at that given point in time. Thinking of Pynchon's interaction with history in such a way reminds us of Strehle's comment that "actualistic fiction opens up the past. It presents actions, not as the products of causality, but as processes in a larger field."<sup>42</sup> *Mason & Dixon's* 'troubling' of representation proposes that an historical identity is something formed through repetition and mutation across the field of history, while questioning if there is anything fixed or fundamentally 'authentic' for such an identity to represent in the first place.

Pynchon explores history's performativity by using motifs of parodic repetition, for instance through the various re-enactments of the Black Hole of Calcutta. Historically the Black Hole was a dungeon in Fort William, Calcutta, where in 1756 British troops were held captive by troops of the Nawab of Bengal in such high numbers that many died of suffocation. Pynchon repeats the scene as an erotic item on a menu in a slave-house-cum-brothel in Cape Town, where, in a reversal of blackface, African slaves play the role of troops for their clients' erotic pleasure:

To find the Black Hole in a menu of Erotic Scenarios surprises no one at this particular end of the World,—Residents, visitors, even a few Seamen of elevated sensibility have return'd, whenever possible, to be urg'd along by graceful Lodge-Nymphs in indigo Dhotis and Turbans, dainty scimitars a-flash, commanding their naked 'Captives' to squeeze together more and more tightly into the scale-model cell with as many Slaves,—impersonating Europeans,—as will make up the complement, calculated at thirty-six, best able to afford visitors an authentic Sense of the Black Hole of Calcutta Experience. (152)

The scene is then re-appropriated as a Broadway musical lost to time, thanks to its lack of advertising or documentation:

At a Theatre with no name, no fix'd address,—this night happ'ning to be upon Broadway,—printing no Handbills, known only by word of mouth, Dixon upon the advice of a Ferry-Companion attends a Stage performance of the musical drama *The Black Hole of Calcutta*, or *The Peevish Wazir* ... [which features] a Corps of two dozen Ladies ... stroll-

41. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

42. Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, 230.

ing about in quasi-Indian Dress and singing, to the (as some would say) inappropriately lively Accompaniment of a small Orchestra. (562)

As the event mutates from one representation to another, its horror morphs. The horror first inverts as the event is re-claimed by white imperialists now forcing their slaves, in a bleak ironic turn, to play the role of captors for the thrill of ‘captives’ who actually hold the power. The horror is finally drained from the event (or, turned into a different kind of horror) when it becomes a saccharine, forgettable Broadway musical. While the musical *The Black Hole of Calcutta* may not be the best example of what Ethelmer meant by history “being tended lovingly and honourably by fabulists and counterfeiter,” it is a grotesque example of the kind of “disorderly tangle of line” the reverend refers to when he writes in his book *Christ and History*:

that there may ever continue more than one life-line back into a Past we risk, each day, losing our forebears in forever,—not a Chain of single Links, for one broken Link could lose us All,—rather, a great disorderly Tangle of Lines, long and short, weak and strong, vanishing into the Mnemonick Deep, with only their Destination in common. (349)

Just as the reference frame of Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke’s world is not absolute or fixed, in the world inhabited by Pynchon’s Mason and Dixon, “too much, out here, fail[s] to mark the Boundaries between Reality and Representation” (429), possibly because there are no such boundaries to be found. The self, in this uncertain “Era of fluid identity” and the constructed “self-made” man, extends throughout representations and prototypes alike, resulting in a proliferation of possible histories, with no one version more or less “authorised” (469). At times, characters are aware of the landscapes they inhabit as mere representations in another’s narrative. When Mason and Maskelyne move to the windier, bleaker side of St Helena, Mason muses, “if the Cape of Good Hope be a Parable about Slavery and Free Will he fancies he has almost tho’ not quite grasp’d, then what of this Translocation?” (158) suggesting this version of Mason is aware of his presence in the reverend’s story, and is trying to make sense of his current setting’s meaning in the narrative. Later, when Mason is recounting to Dixon his escape from a walled garden behind an ear museum, Mason makes a joke—which is at the same time the reverend’s joke, and Pynchon’s joke—about his being only a representation: “I was in a state. I must have found the way out. Unless the real Mason is yet there captive in that exitless Patch, and I but his Representative” (180). In both of these examples Mason is aware of being a replica of the “real” Mason; or coming “after” the more authentic Mason. However, Pynchon takes the blurring of boundaries between the represented and the real to an absurd extreme when the eleven days that were struck from the British calendar in 1752 become eleven *real* days severed from the rest of time:

Mason for a while had presum’d it but a matter of confusing dates, which are Names, with Days, which are real Things. Yet for anyone he met born before ’52 and alive after it, the missing Eleven Days arose again and again in Conversation, sooner or later characteriz’d as ‘brute Absence,’ or ‘a Tear thro’ the fabric of Life,’—and the more he wrestl’d with the Question, the more the advantage shifted toward a Belief, as he would tell Dixon

one day, 'In a slowly rotating Loop, or if you like, Vortex, of eleven days, tangent to the Linear Path of what we imagine as Ordinary Time, but excluded from it, and repeating itself,—without end.' (555)

Later, Mason admits to actually being stuck in the missing eleven days whilst at Oxford—his skepticism-turned-belief finally having become real (559). In this example, dates are not simply representations of days, they are one and the same; here, to re-organize a system of cataloguing the world is to re-organize the actual world. The reverend's narrative progression and his protagonists' journey through physical space are similarly conjoined, as when the astronomers journey east, the movement through representational space necessitates that the narrative similarly look back, through a period of extended analepsis: "Again are the Party returning Eastward, into Memory, and Confabulation. The physickal World, from Gusts to Eclipses, must insist upon itself a bit more, so claim'd are the Surveyors in their contra-solar Return by Might-it-bes, and If-it-weres,—not to mention What-was-thats" (618). Here, again, is an example of Pynchon's 'implicit' metafiction: to move backwards geographically, in the world of *Mason & Dixon*, is to move backwards rhetorically, as geography is a trick of the text.

But what does Pynchon's deft use of these 'implicit' metafictional devices amount to? Is he attempting to cut all ties between his fiction-world and its referent? Is he actually arguing *against* the notion of a referent to begin with, as is the project of extreme metafiction? In his 2001 review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, James Wood includes *Mason & Dixon* in a (then-) new genre of fiction he styled "hysterical realism". Wood characterises the hysterical realist novel not as an example of metafiction, but as an exhausted form of realism. These novels present such a proliferation of characters that they become cartoonish; they use storytelling both as "a kind of grammar," and as a source of "perpetual motion" energy; they are "ashamed of silence"; they aim to "abolish stillness"; they feature paranoid, interconnected webs of narrative. Wood believes all this "shouted spectacle" is being used by authors such as DeLillo, Pynchon, Smith, and Wallace, as a means to evade the feeling and humanity he believes is essential to compelling fiction. Wood writes:

An excess of storytelling has become the contemporary way of shrouding, in majesty, a lack ... That lack is the human. All these contemporary deformations flow from a crisis that is not only the fault of the writers concerned, but is now of some lineage: the crisis of character, and how to represent it in fiction. Since modernism, many of the finest writers have been offering critique and parody of the idea of character, in the absence of convincing ways to return to an innocent mimesis. Certainly, the characters who inhabit the big, ambitious contemporary novels have a showy liveliness, a theatricality, that almost succeeds in hiding the fact that they are without life: liveliness hangs off them like jewelry.<sup>43</sup>

As Jeffrey Staiger has argued, Wood's review fails to explain *why* a writer might "aspire to write serious fiction that avoids plumbing the depths of character." Wood instead leaves it to the reader "to suppose that they just want to entertain, or attract notice, which is, after all,

43. "Human, All Too Inhuman," James Wood, accessed March 4, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman>



the goal of the hysteric.” Staiger suggests that for some ‘hysterical realists’ “the grimness and absurdity of the civilization that had suffered the carnage of world war and the holocaust, and that now lay under the steady menace of nuclear annihilation, required a more radical squashing of form. The vision of a dehumanizing world found a symbolic outlet in reductive means of characterization, in semi-allegorical types, grotesques, cartoons.” In retaliation to Wood’s complaint that these authors mask hollowness with “fine prose”, Staiger argues that “Wood is putting into question a pair of postmodernism’s guiding doctrines, namely that language creates reality and that the richer the language the richer the creation.”<sup>44</sup> According to Staiger, Wood deplores these novels for demonstrating inauthenticity, ignoring the fact that inauthenticity is precisely the premise of many of these novels. In making these arguments, Staiger tugs *Mason & Dixon* back into the camp of metafiction. However, I would argue that these novels are, at the same time, actualist, if the actual world these authors engage with is perceived by them as depthless and cartoonish. In the case of Wallace, his 1993 essay reminds us that he, like Wood, believed his generation of culture-makers was embarrassed by sincerity. Could it be that Wallace’s novels turned his own generation’s insincerity against itself, in a *sincere* attempt at mimesis? Such features are not only linguistic tricks of a text concerned with its own illusions, but comments about the twentieth-century world Wallace, and other ‘hysterical realist’ authors, existed within.

More typically, *Mason & Dixon* is considered to be an example of historiographic metafiction, a generic term coined by Linda Hutcheon, “whose metafictional self-reflexivity (and intertextuality) renders their implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic, to say the least.”<sup>45</sup> But Hutcheon elaborates:

The certainty of direct reference of the historical novel or even the nonfictional novel is gone. So is the certainty of self-reference implied in the Borgesian claim that both literature and the world are equally fictive realities. The postmodern relationship between fiction and history is an even more complex one of interaction and mutual implication. Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the ‘world’ and literature.<sup>46</sup>

What is essential to historiographic metafiction (as opposed to metafiction) is the parallel status of the “intertexts of history and fiction”. The tension created between history/fiction and ‘world’/literature is remarkably similar to the complementarities central to Strehle’s actualist fiction.

In her introduction to *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon’s Mason & Dixon*, Elizabeth Wall Hinds is quick to identify *Mason & Dixon* as an example of historiographic metafiction, but she is equally quick to set it apart from other books in the genre, arguing that:

While historical metafiction does aptly name a quality of attention drawn to history as discourse, it does not go so far as to finally parse a book like *Mason & Dixon* ... [which]

44. Staiger, “James Wood’s Case against ‘Hysterical Realism,’” 644; 645; 648.

45. Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London: Methuen, 1984), 4.

46. *Ibid.*

uses its 'parallactic' doubling of views to make an ethical point quite beyond the usual play of most postmodern fiction. This point—and its deep association with Pynchon's historical method—is what Frank Palmeri elegantly describes as 'other than postmodern,' a 'new structure of thought and expression' ... that moves away from the 'representation of extreme paranoia, toward a vision of local ethico-political possibilities.'<sup>47</sup>

While postmodern fiction is typically *deconstructive*, the subjunctive narrative territory in *Mason & Dixon*, created through an oscillation between past and present, and through the juxtaposition of multiple versions of what *might have* been, is hopeful, *constructive*: an opening up of history. Pynchon's nostalgia for futures which did not eventuate can only be born from a utopian desire for something 'better'. As Shawn Smith has written: "Yet [*Mason & Dixon*] is not entirely pessimistic. Pynchon seems to suggest that American history is equal parts moral failure and romantic striving toward ideals that, in fact, may be beyond our (or anyone else's) capacity to realise them. But that does not invalidate their idealistic power."<sup>48</sup>

*Mason & Dixon* is not necessarily an example of the "new sincerity" David Foster Wallace was calling for in 1994, and yet with his hopeful twist on a typically nihilistic form, Pynchon certainly risks "the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs ... accusations of sentimentality, melodrama." In *Mason & Dixon*, the texts of history are not simply fodder for linguistic play. Pynchon uses linguistic play to engage with the paradox central to the ethics of historiography: how does one negotiate fact and fiction in the reading and writing of history, when both could potentially negate the other, and both require the other in order to be properly understood?

47. Wall Hinds, introduction to *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's Mason & Dixon*, 18–19.

48. Shawn Smith, *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 178.

---

## PART TWO

### EUGENIA FALLENI: UNCERTAINTY IN THE RESEARCH OF AN INDETERMINATE IDENTITY

Ever since her arrest on 5 July, 1920, the story of Eugenia Falleni (alias Harry Crawford, Nina Falleni, Jack Crawford, Jean Ford) has been the subject of sensational news stories and, more recently, films, plays, long form biographies and academic studies.<sup>1</sup> In the ninety-five years since her story first became public, various details have changed in the popular narrative, and Falleni's role has gradually morphed from 'criminal' to 'victim'. Falleni was first depicted in the press of the 1920s and 1930s as a 'human curio', 'monster' or medical case study of sexual inversion. In the 1950s, 60s, and 70s Falleni resurfaced in the tabloid press as the subject of 'true crime' feature articles which largely emphasised her violent domination over her vulnerable wife and step-son. It was not until Suzanne Falkiner's biography was published in 1988 that authors sought to explain Falleni's alleged crimes through an analysis of the social and historical contexts that she existed within. In the hands of twentieth-century storytellers Falleni's story has been a fluid narrative, and she herself gave many different versions of her own life, all of which emphasised different truths and lies. Research into Falleni's life suggests she did not have one 'authentic' self hidden from view, waiting to be revealed. All the versions of herself—represented and real—appear to be authentically part of the contexts in which they were created. Her case appears to illustrate with special force that identity, gender and

---

1. A note on pronouns: as discussed in the later section 'Was Falleni a transgender man?' (page 72), we will never know how Eugenia Falleni would have preferred to identify, had more 'types' of femininity been available to her in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unfortunately, there are no adequate pronouns in the English language with which to refer to someone of indeterminate gender. I have made the less-than-ideal decision to refer to Falleni as a 'he' when he passed as Harry Crawford, and to refer to Falleni as a 'she' when she passed as Tally Ho, Nina, or Jean Ford. When negotiating the border between his passing and the 'revelation' of her sex by the police, I have used others' perceptions of Falleni's gender to determine which pronoun to use, as so much of my treatment of her story has to do with the 'collapsing down' that takes place when one is observed by external subjectivities. When referring to Falleni as a collective or singular identity, I have reluctantly settled on the feminine pronoun, for the relatively arbitrary reason that her 'life' was bookended with female identities. I have tried, where possible, to refer to Eugenia Falleni as Falleni, for its gender-neutrality, although when discussing Falleni in the context of her family home (rife with Fallenis) I have used her given name.

even sex, as Judith Butler has suggested, are not qualities assigned at birth, but are rather the culmination of many small, repeated, observed, and performed acts, impossible to extricate from social experience.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EUGENIA FALLENI, ACCORDING TO PRIMARY SOURCES

Eugenia Falleni was born in Ardenza, Italy, on July 25, 1875.<sup>2</sup> At the age of two, she travelled with her parents Isola and Luigi Falleni to New Zealand on board the *Waikato*, leaving behind a younger sister, Lisa.<sup>3</sup> The family first lived at Wanganui where Eugenia's brother, Federigo, was born in 1880, and died at six months of age. Her sister, Ida, was born in 1882. When Eugenia was around seven years of age, the family moved to Wellington where another sister, Marie Rose, was born. Isola gave birth to seven more children over the next fourteen years. Eugenia's first brother, Alberto Gorgeo, did not survive for longer than a few months. Her first surviving brother, Giuseppe Ilio, was born when Eugenia was eleven. Isola and Luigi are on the 1896 electoral roll as living on Coromandel Street, Newtown, a working class suburb of Wellington. Isola's occupation is listed as "household duties", while Luigi's is listed as "fisherman".<sup>4</sup>

On September 16, 1891, a notice was published in the *Evening Post*: "NINA FALLENI, aged 15, left her home in Newtown, early on the morning of Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> inst., and has not since been heard of. Information is anxiously sought by her father and mother."<sup>5</sup> Although she would have been sixteen at the time, this notice is most likely in reference to Eugenia, who was, later in her life, also known as "Nina".<sup>6</sup>

On September 14, 1894, Ugenia Falleni [*sic*], 19, is registered as having married "image maker" Braseli Innocente, thirty-one, at the registry office in Wellington. Luigi Falleni and E. Picoutti, a fishmonger, are listed as witnesses on the marriage certificate.<sup>7</sup>

Nine months later, in July the following year, New Zealand newspapers widely reported that an unnamed girl had been living with her parents up until nine months prior, after which she met "a specious scoundrel in Wellington, who took advantage of her innocence, and with him she went through a form of marriage." Upon arriving in Auckland, one article states, the

2. Ardenza is given as Falleni's birthplace by her sister-in-law to Suzanne Falkiner in 1987; see Suzanne Falkiner, *Eugenia: a Man* (Sydney: Xoum Publishing, 2014), 215. 25/7/1875 is given as Falleni's birthdate in State Records NSW: NRS 2496 [3/6006] 1920, Photo #499. Mark Tedeschi and Falkiner both claim she was born in January 1875, though they do not provide a reference for this date.

3. "Many Years in New Zealand," *Evening Post*, May 6, 1933, 11, accessed via <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>; Falkiner, *Eugenia: a Man*, 215.

4. Wanganui is listed as the place of birth of Federigo and Ida Falleni. New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs, Federigo death cert [1880/3173]; Ida [1882/2334]; Marie Rose [1883/10995]; Emelia Maria [1885/6261]; Giuseppe Ilio [1886/15598]; Gimi Alfredo [1889/12839]; Louis Hermandos [1892/13636]; Alberto Georgeo (born) [1894/17801]; Anita Mary [1895/13338]; Lily Falleni [1897/1709]; Alberto Georgeo (died) [1894/2935]; Wellington Suburbs Electoral Roll, 1896, 97.

5. "Missing Friends," *Evening Post*, September 16, 1891, 3, accessed via <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>.

6. Marcellina Bombelli, in Eugenia's trial, says she knows the accused "under the name of Nina"; Marcellina Bombelli in *Rex v. Falleni*, NRS 2713 [6/1077] State Records NSW (1920), 55.

7. New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs, 1894/ 2338.

girl discovered that her husband already had a family to another woman, and ran away back to Wellington. There she obtained a suit of clothes, had her hair cropped, and gained employment at a drainpipe manufactory without telling her family she had returned. Outside the Opera House with her “yard mates” she was recognised by a family friend, who alerted the Salvation Army to “the facts in connection with her sad case.” She was then encouraged by the captain of the Pauline Home to take shelter there, “pending her obtaining a situation more suitable and congenial to her sex than the one she was recently rescued from.”<sup>8</sup>

One year later, on July 29, 1896, the *Wanganui Herald* reported the case of “Lena Salette”, twenty-two, who was arrested for vagrancy after dressing as a man and appealing to the Masterton Benevolent Society for work. The article states that “the young woman is the same one who was recently discovered in Wellington under similar circumstances. She was then working in a brickyard.”<sup>9</sup> A search of New Zealand newspapers in the twelve months prior to the publication of this article does not reveal any similar cases, other than that of the girl working in “the drainpipe manufactory” in 1895. It is highly likely both these stories are about Eugenia.

Falleni next appears in government records a little over two years later on September 19, 1898, as the mother of Josephine Falleni, born in a house on Pelham Street, Double Bay, Sydney. Here, the mother is listed as “Lena Falleni,” which strengthens the connection between Eugenia Falleni and “Lena Salette” of the 1896 New Zealand papers. A Mrs DeAngelis is recorded as having witnessed the birth—a woman Josephine will live with in Pelham Street, call Granny, and who will “often” tell Josephine that her mother tried to smother her when she was a baby. According to Josephine’s later statement to police, on “many occasions” her mother returned to try to take her away from Mrs DeAngelis.<sup>10</sup>

In about 1907, four-year-old Harry Birkett and his recently widowed mother Annie moved to a Dr Clarke’s residence in Wahroonga, where Annie worked as a housekeeper for approximately six years.<sup>11</sup> In the last two years of her employment at Clarke’s, Annie “was often together” with Harry Leo Crawford, “a useful and kitchen man” also employed by the doctor. Annie eventually left Clarke’s to buy a confectionary shop opposite Gladstone Park on Darling St, Balmain, in 1913. Harry Birkett later stated that “Crawford also left Dr. Clarke’s about the same time and followed mother and I and subsequently took lodgings somewhere in Darling St a little lower than where we had the shop.”<sup>12</sup>

Harry Leon Crawford and Annie Birkett married at the Methodist church in Balmain on 19 February 1913. The marriage was witnessed by Annie Birkett’s sister, Lily Nugent, and the

8. “A Bigamous Marriage. A Woman Disguises Herself as a Boy,” *Marlborough Express*, July 24, 1895, 4, accessed via <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>

9. “An Extraordinary Case,” *Wanganui Herald*, July 29, 1896, 2, accessed via <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz>

10. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 36114/1898; “Man-Woman’s Daughter; Her Relations with Mrs Birkett; Things She Never Told; Falleni’s Statement to Police,” *Evening News*, August 19, 1920, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

11. Harry Birkett senior died in 1906, although he may have been estranged from his wife, as he died in Newcastle, and (according to Harry Birkett) prior to working for Dr Clarke, Annie had worked for Judge Curlewis in North Sydney: Department of Justice NSW, 2274/1906.

12. Harry Birkett, *Papers and Depositions, Supreme Court Sydney and on Circuit*, Criminal Investigation Branch, no. NRS 880 [9/7250], June 13 1920, 1.

minister's wife. Harry Crawford's parents are given as Harry Leo Crawford, master mariner, and Louisa Buti—the surname of Falleni's grandmother via her second husband, Vincenzo Buti.<sup>13</sup>

On May 27, 1914, Josephine DeAngelis (then fifteen) is mentioned in the *New South Wales Police Gazette* as the complainant for the arrest of Jack Coroneo, "charged with failing to make adequate provision for the payment of preliminary expenses of and incidental to and immediately succeeding the birth of an infant." He is described as being "a Greek, recently employed at Woodward's oyster saloon, King-street, City."<sup>14</sup> Her address is given as "3 Hopman's-lane, Balmain", which matches the address of Mrs Keith, a woman Josephine mentions in her statement to police in 1917. According to her statement, she lived with Mrs Keith "around the time she had some trouble" and afterwards went to "St Margaret's Home", a maternity home for unwed mothers.<sup>15</sup> According to the Police Gazette, Josephine was living in Balmain in May of 1914, however, according to Josephine's statement she moved to Balmain in the latter part of 1914, and according to her baby's death certificate, the infant died at the Shaftesbury Home in Vaucluse on December 10, 1914, aged three months.<sup>16</sup>

In 1920 Harry Birkett recalled that, about six months after Annie and Crawford were married, Annie sold the shop and she and her son moved in with her sister, Lily Nugent, in Kogarah for a few weeks before moving in to their own place nearby.<sup>17</sup> However, Josephine recalled that the whole family, including Josephine, "went to Kogarah to live" after she had returned from St Margaret's in 1914.<sup>18</sup>

In 1915, Crawford was employed at Perdriau's rubber factory and the family moved to Drummoyne—first to a brick residence at number seven, The Avenue, then, in January 1917, the family moved to a weatherboard house at number five next door.<sup>19</sup>

In 1916 Harry Birkett was permanently employed by Mr and Mrs Bone, who ran a grocery store on the street corner of Lyons Road and The Avenue, Drummoyne. Annie Birkett would also occasionally "do domestic duties" for Mrs Bone when her maid was away on holidays. Harry continued to work for the Bones up until September 29, 1917.<sup>20</sup>

The Crawfords' neighbour Mrs Jane Wigg reported that she last saw Mrs Crawford before lunch on the Friday before the Eight Hour Day (September 28, 1917).<sup>21</sup> On the Saturday afternoon "previous to the Eight Hour Day", Crawford asked his friend and neighbour Lydia Parnell to mind two rings for his wife, "as his wife had threatened to run away with a plumber

13. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 867/1913; Falkiner, 2014, 217.

14. "Deserting Wives and Families, Service, etc.," *New South Wales Police Gazette*, May 27 1914, 255, accessed via <http://www.ancestry.com>.

15. "The 'Man-Woman' Annie Birkett's Death. Eugene Falleni at Chatswood. 'Melancholy'; and the Mystery of the Moat. A Trip to the Gap, and Some Holes at Woollahra," *Truth*, August 22 1920, 10, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

16. Registry of Births, Deaths, and Marriages, 16305/1914

17. Harry Birkett in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 4.

18. "Man-Woman's Daughter," *Evening News*, August 19 1920.

19. Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 2; Birkett in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 11.

20. Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 2. See also Clara Bone in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 38, although according to Birkett's statement he continued to work up until Tuesday October 2, 1917.

21. Jane Wigg in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 43.

and he said those rings were his property as he bought them for her.”<sup>22</sup> He told Parnell that his wife was not satisfied with him because he was out of employment.<sup>23</sup> Harry Birkett’s employer, Ernest Bone, saw Crawford on Lyons Road, Drummoyne, on Saturday October 29.<sup>24</sup> Lydia Parnell saw Crawford again “on Eight Hour Day [Monday October 1] coming from the tram terminus towards his home.” She estimated “that would be between 7-15 and 7-45 in the evening.”<sup>25</sup> Harry Birkett returned from a holiday at Collaroy with Mrs Bone on Monday October 1, to find Harry Crawford “sitting on a chair there and a bottle of Johnny Walker [sic] whisky was there and a small glass.” When Harry Birkett asked where his mother was, Crawford first replied that he did not know, and then replied that “she [had] gone to North Sydney with a Mrs Murray and her daughter.”<sup>26</sup>

On Tuesday morning Harry Birkett woke up to find that “the whiskey had practically disappeared from the bottle” and it seemed as if Crawford had not gone to bed.<sup>27</sup> Birkett went to work, and Crawford went to the Parnell’s house, where Lydia Parnell made him breakfast. He told Lydia Parnell that he was upset, that he didn’t know where his wife could have gone, and decided the best thing to do was to “get rid of the home.”<sup>28</sup>

At around noon on Wednesday October 3, Crawford paid his grocery account with Mrs Bone, and told her that his wife had gone away with another man. The household furniture was sold and removed by Joel Hart on the same day.<sup>29</sup>

Either on Wednesday October 3 or shortly after, Crawford moved into a boarding house in Woolloomooloo, run by a German woman called Henrietta Schieblich. Crawford gave the name “Jack” and took a front room with two single beds, one for his stepson, who arrived the following day.<sup>30</sup> At one point during Crawford’s stay, Henrietta Schieblich found him breaking up boxes containing “some beautiful washing linen, and lace, and curtains and things” with an axe. On October 16, Crawford asked Harry Birkett to read him an article in *Evening News* about a pair of shoes found on a burned woman on the banks of the Lane Cove River. A few days afterwards Crawford took Harry Birkett out of the house during a thunder storm. They left at 6 pm and did not return until 11 pm. According to Henrietta Schieblich, “when they came back they were very wet and covered all over with sand.” After this night “the boy went to Italian people.”<sup>31</sup>

Marcellina Bombelli, who lived at 156 Cathedral St, Sydney, later testified that “the accused brought the boy to my house. I don’t remember the date or the day, but I know it was

22. Lydia Parnell in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 55.

23. “Mrs. Birkett’s Death; Doctors Say Probably Burned Alive; Theories About Cracks in Skull; Eugene Falleni’s Haggard Looks,” *Evening News*, August 18 1920, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

24. Ernest Bone in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 41.

25. Parnell in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 54.

26. Birkett in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 5.

27. Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 2.

28. Parnell in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 54–55.

29. Bone in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 39; Joel Hart in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 45.

30. At the trial Henrietta Schieblich testified that Crawford moved in “on the second of third day after the murder was done with that lady in Chatswood. I saw something in a paper”; Henrietta Schieblich in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 64.

31. Schieblich in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 64–66; Birkett in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 8. The article in question: “Chatswood Mystery. Woman Not yet Identified. Who Patched the Shoes?” *Evening News*, October 16, 1917, 3, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

in November, 1917 ... The accused asked me would I take this boy into my house because his father was dead and his mother was ill in hospital the accused thought with consumption. The boy remained with me nearly one year.” In March 1919 Harry Birkett moved into a house in Sans Souci with Marcellina’s son, Frank Bombelli.<sup>32</sup> At some point between the end of 1917 and 1920 Harry Birkett and Harry Crawford lost contact.

Harry Crawford was a frequent visitor at his friend Lydia Parnell’s house up until March 1918.<sup>33</sup> He attended parties with Lydia’s friend Emma Belbin, who saw him often, and wrote two letters for him. Crawford told her that his wife had gone to the country, that she used to drink and he would not have her back.<sup>34</sup> Before Easter 1918, he moved into a boarding house next door to Alice Maud Gough, on Merton Street, Rozelle. According to Gough, Crawford told her “that his wife was a drunkard and when he came home from work that the crockery used to be all broken up and there was no meal ready, no tea ready.” When Gough knew Crawford, “he worked at different places, he never stopped in a place long.”<sup>35</sup> Between the end of 1917 and 1919, Crawford returned to Henrietta Schieblich’s boarding house four times. On one occasion, he showed her that his finger was missing, and told her it had been cut off at the Balmain meatworks. On another occasion he said he was living with his wife again on the North Shore, “and she was heavy drinking ... and he could not stand it anymore and he left her in North Shore with the stepson.”<sup>36</sup> On yet another occasion he “brought a lady to the house”, and told Schieblich that she was “well educated, and had money too”.<sup>37</sup>

Harry Leo Crawford and Elizabeth King Allison were married at the Canterbury Registrar’s Office on September 29, 1919.<sup>38</sup> At around the same time Frank Bombelli saw Crawford working at Richardson’s Hotel, near Central Station.<sup>39</sup> Harry Birkett subsequently went to find Crawford at Richardson’s “to see if he had heard anything about Mother.” Crawford told Birkett he was too busy to speak, but suggested Birkett return the following day. When Birkett did, Crawford “had left the hotel” and Birkett did not see him again until after Crawford’s arrest.<sup>40</sup>

On June 13, 1920, Harry Birkett gave a statement to police, informing them that his mother had gone missing on Friday September 28, 1917, and that on the subsequent Wednesday his stepfather, Harry Leo Crawford, had taken him on a one-way ferry ride to the Gap where Crawford asked him “to come inside the fence and throw stones also and see them land in the water.”<sup>41</sup> In the same statement he told police that while he and Crawford were staying at “Mrs Shipleys” in Woolloomooloo, Crawford had returned home one night with a newspa-

32. Bombelli in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 55; Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 6.

33. Parnell in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 56.

34. Emma Belbin in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 47.

35. Alice Maud Gough in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 70–71.

36. Schieblich in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 70; 67.

37. “Mrs. Birkett’s Death,” *Evening News*, August 18 1920.

38. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 8873/1919.

39. On June 13, 1920, Harry Birkett mentions he saw Crawford at Richardson’s Hotel eight or nine months prior; Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 6.

40. Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 6.

41. Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 2; 3.



per, and said he had heard something in town about a murder.<sup>42</sup> Birkett also stated to police that a few days after he had read the article, Crawford took him to a vacant lot in Bellevue Hill to dig holes “some three or four feet wide and longer,” and about “three or four feet deep” in the sand during a thunderstorm.<sup>43</sup>

At about 11:30 am on July 5, 1920, Detective-Sergeant Stuart Robson and Detective Bill Watkins went to the Empire Hotel, on the corner of Johnson Street and Parramatta Road, Annandale. The two detectives spoke to Harry Crawford in the office of the licensee, and then took Crawford to the detective office “to make further investigations.”<sup>44</sup> At Criminal Investigations Branch Sydney, Harry Crawford gave a voluntary statement in which he claimed he was a Scottish man and afterwards assented to a medical examination (after first refusing) that confirmed for the police that Crawford was a woman.<sup>45</sup> After confirming with police that her identity was “Eugene Falleni”, she was taken to her residence, where the police made a search. According to Robson, Lizzie Crawford was present and crying.<sup>46</sup> According to Sergeant Armfield, Lizzie Crawford was not home at the time of the search.<sup>47</sup> They found a locked portmanteau that contained a suit of man’s clothes, a revolver with two discharged cartridges, and a dildo. According to Robson, when he asked Crawford if his first wife knew “that you were using anything like this,” Crawford replied, “no, not till about the latter part of our marriage ... I think somebody had been talking.” The police then took Falleni back to the Central Police Station and charged “Eugene Falleni” with the murder of Annie Birkett.<sup>48</sup>

The police sought three remands—on July 6, July 21, and July 29—at the local police court on Liverpool Street.<sup>49</sup> On July 14 Josephine Falleni/DeAngelis was traced by police as living in Harris Street, Pyrmont. She gave a statement to the police, excerpts from which were published in *Evening News*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *Truth* as part of the coverage of the third day of Falleni’s committal hearing.<sup>50</sup> On July 22, Falleni was identified by Jabez James Hicks, a former employee of the Cumberland Paper Mills, in a line up. Hicks stated that he had seen the accused on the morning of Friday 28 September, 1917, in the scrub near where a burned body—suspected to be Annie Birkett’s—was found.<sup>51</sup> The police then took the accused and Hicks to the location, and Hicks indicated where he had seen

---

42. Birkett, *Papers and Depositions*, 5.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Stuart Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 79.

45. “Man-Woman’s Daughter,” *Evening News*, August 19, 1920; Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 81.

46. Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 83.

47. Vince Kelly, *Rugged Angel: The Amazing Career of Policewoman Lillian Armfield* (NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1995), 147.

48. Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 83.

49. “Man-Woman in Court. Murder of Annie Birkett. Crowds to See Masquerader. Bail Not Asked For,” *Evening News*, July 6, 1920, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; “Current News,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, July 15, 1920, 4, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; “Falleni Case,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 30, 1920, 6, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

50. “Man-Woman’s Daughter,” *Evening News*, August 19, 1920; “Eugene Falleni. Daughter in the Box. Treated as a Hostile Witness,” *The Daily Telegraph*, August 20, 1920, 9, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; “Falleni Case. Daughter in Court. Accused Committed for Trial,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 20, 1920, 10 accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; “The ‘Man-Woman,’” *Truth*, August 22, 1920.

51. Jabez James Hicks in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 47.

the accused. Falleni said she had never been there before, but later said that she had briefly worked at the cornflour mill on the far bank of the river.<sup>52</sup> On July 29, Eliel Irene Carroll also identified the accused in a line-up. Carroll had told police that while walking through the scrub on her way to the paper mills on Friday 28 September, 1917, she had seen the accused sitting on a rock with his face in his hands.<sup>53</sup> Before they had made their identifications, both Hicks and Carroll had seen a photograph of the accused taken after her arrest, published in *The Sun* newspaper.<sup>54</sup>

Falleni's committal hearing took place over three days: Monday August 16, Wednesday August 18, and Thursday August 19, 1920. Falleni was represented by Maddocks Cohen, and Roderick Kidston represented the Crown.<sup>55</sup> On the second day of the hearing the magistrate Mr Gale, "escorted across the bench and into the court Mr. Graham Browne and Miss Marie Tempest, the well-known actor and actress. They occupied seats adjacent to the solicitors' table, and appeared keenly interested in the proceedings."<sup>56</sup> Two witnesses appeared at the hearing who did not subsequently appear at Falleni's trial in October: Lily May Hewitt, who testified that she saw smoke rise from the alleged murder site at 4 pm on Monday October 1, 1917, and Josephine Falleni, who cried throughout giving evidence, contradicted her original statement to police, and was finally put on the record as being a hostile witness.<sup>57</sup> "Eugene Falleni" was "committed to stand trial at the Central Criminal Court [Darlinghurst] on August 30, 1920", but did not stand trial until Tuesday October 5.<sup>58</sup>

At her trial, Falleni was represented by junior barrister Archibald McDonell, instructed by Maddocks Cohen, and the Crown was represented by W. T. Coyle K.C., instructed by John Gonsalves.<sup>59</sup> After a two-day trial, the jury issued a verdict of guilty and Chief Justice Sir William Cullen passed the death sentence.<sup>60</sup> Falleni appealed against her conviction six weeks later, but was unsuccessful.<sup>61</sup> On November 30, 1920, a State Cabinet meeting decided to commute Falleni's death sentence to life imprisonment.<sup>62</sup>

Josephine married Arthur Whitby on August 18, 1920, the day before she was due to appear at her mother's committal hearing.<sup>63</sup> They had a child, Rita Josephine, on November 20,

52. Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 84. Also Walsh in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 74-75.

53. Eliel Irene Carroll in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 35.

54. Hicks in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 49; Carroll in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 36-37.

55. "Man-Woman in Court; Did Falleni Murder Mrs. Birkett? Deceased's Son's Strange Tale; His Wanderings with Step-Father," *Evening News*, August 16, 1920, 5, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

56. "Box Seats at Murder Trial," *Sunday Times*, August 22, 1920, 4, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

57. "Man-Woman Case. Third Day's Evidence. Court Again Crowded. The Fire in the Bush," *The Sun*, August 19, 1920, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; "Man-Woman's Daughter," *Evening News*, August 19, 1920.

58. "Eugene Falleni. Daughter in the Box," *Daily Telegraph*, August 20, 1920.

59. "Falleni on Trial. Lane Cove Tragedy. Accused in Women's Clothes. The Crown Case," *The Sun*, October 5, 1920, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

60. *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 91.

61. "Court of Criminal Appeal," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 13, 1920, 9, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

62. "Death Sentence Commuted," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 1, 1920, 11, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

63. Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 13226/1920.

1921, and by December 1922, Josephine and her daughter (then living in Lakemba) had been deserted.<sup>64</sup> Josephine died on 19 December, 1924.<sup>65</sup> The funeral notice read:

WHITBY.—The Relatives and Friends of Mr. ARTHUR RAYMOND WHITBY, of 54 Darlington-road, Darlington, are kindly invited to attend the Funeral of his beloved WIFE Josephine Rita; to leave the Mortuary Station, Regent-street, city, THIS DAY, at 2.55, for Catholic Cemetery, Rookwood.<sup>66</sup>

Falleni was known at Long Bay as “Jean Falleni”.<sup>67</sup> She was joined at the prison by the only other woman serving time for murder, Dorothy Mort, in April 1921.<sup>68</sup> Dorothy Mort and Jean Falleni became “close friends”, and the cases of the two were often compared in the press.<sup>69</sup> In 1921 a Mrs Webb served a brief amount of time in the women’s penitentiary at Long Bay, and commented that Mrs Mort was “provided with special rooms, and the other prisoners [were] not allowed to converse with her, while Falleni was placed in with the general prisoners”.<sup>70</sup> Jean Falleni was said to have “many friends in gaol,” and was “more popular than ... Dorothy Mort whom the other girls out there said ‘gave herself airs’”.<sup>71</sup>

Two years into her life sentence, Jean was reported to have been removed to the Coast Hospital “in the grip of an agonising cancer of the stomach”.<sup>72</sup> Six weeks later *Truth* hinted that she may have attempted suicide, when they reported that “The prison authorities, immediately they discover suicidal tendencies in inmates, have them guarded day and night. A recent illustration is furnished by the case of the ‘Man-Woman’ Falleni.”<sup>73</sup>

In 1928 an interview with murder suspect Mrs Trapman was published by *Truth*. Mrs Trapman and her son Chuey spent time at Long Bay Gaol in the lead up to her trial, and said of Falleni:

Eugene Falleni was there. She used to amuse Chuey—she loved him. He had to go to the Coast Hospital for chicken-pox. When they took him away she cried herself to sleep. She has been there for nine years now.

64. “Deserting Wives and Families, Service, etc.” *New South Wales Police Gazette*, November 15, 1922, 625, accessed via <http://www.ancestry.com>.

65. “Family Notices,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 20, 1924, 12, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

66. *Ibid.*, 11.

67. J. D. Corbett, “Man-Woman Eugene Fallini Makes Appeal for Freedom; Tells Her Poignant Story to *Smith’s Weekly*; Frail Prisoner Is Pathetic Figure in Gaol; Has No ‘Friends, Money, or Even Influence,’” *Smith’s Weekly*, March 8, 1930, 1.

68. Although there was little doubt Dorothy Mort had killed Dr Claude Tozer, she was deemed not guilty on the grounds of insanity, and incarcerated at Long Bay Gaol “at the governor’s pleasure”; see Mark Tedeschi, *Eugenia* (Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 202.

69. Corbett, “Man-Woman Eugene Fallini Makes Appeal for Freedom,” 1.

70. “Local and General. Prison Treatment,” *Tweed Daily*, July 16, 1921, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

71. “Class Conscious Prisoners out at ‘the Bay’, Women Who Have Gone Wrong and Women Wronged. Ethel Benn. Famous Female Criminals and Treatment Behind Drab Prison Walls. Edith Ashton. For the Love of Love and Some Man!” *Truth*, August 10, 1930, 11, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

72. “Odds and Ends,” *Freemason’s Journal*, May 25, 1922, 22, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

73. “Young Woman’s Death. Suicides in a Hospital Ward. Is There Any Suppression of a Previous Attempt?” *Truth*, July 9, 1922, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

She is fifty-seven and looks an old woman. She looks after the fernery and feeds the birds. She's very active, buzzing about like a bee in a bottle.

I thought a lot of her. She is trusted by the officers, too.<sup>74</sup>

Falleni was visited in prison by Dr Herbert Michael Moran in 1929, at the suggestion of Coyle K.C., the prosecuting lawyer at her trial.<sup>75</sup> Moran was fluent in Italian, and at the time “had foolish ideas of getting her returned to her native country.” Falleni did not tell him anything that had not already appeared in the papers, and “always affirmed her innocence”. In his book, *Viewless Winds* (1939), Moran is the first to explicitly claim that Falleni had been raped on board a ship en route to NSW when he writes that the captain had “surprised the secret of her sex” and “used her violently”. Moran also refers to a “ridiculous little sentimental liaison in gaol with another murderess,” which Falkiner and Tedeschi have taken to be Dorothy Mort.<sup>76</sup>

Following Mort's release in October, 1929, Falleni became despondent and was promoted to Mort's old job as prison librarian, suggesting that by now she had learned to read.<sup>77</sup> In March 1930, Falleni gave her first interview and account of events that took place in 1917. Speaking to Smith's Weekly journalist J. D. Corbett, Falleni again maintained her innocence.<sup>78</sup> Two months later, Falleni hosted a Mother's Day tea at Long Bay.<sup>79</sup>

Falleni was released from prison on the evening of Wednesday 18 February, 1931, after the Attorney General, Joe Lamaro, personally interviewed her in prison.<sup>80</sup>

Three years after her release, Falleni took an Italian woman with severe breast cancer to visit Dr Moran. She asked Moran to keep her past a secret from the woman, whose house she had been working in as “useful help,” but Moran later learned that the woman knew of Falleni's past and had taken her in as an act of charity. A few weeks later Falleni visited the doctor again, requesting his help on an invalid pension application. He gave her the necessary certificate, but her application was denied.<sup>81</sup>

From 1934–1938 she conducted business on an almost-daily basis with chef and residential proprietor William Thornton. During this time Falleni ran a “residential” at number twenty-seven Glenmore Road as Jean Ford. On 9 June 1938, Ford sold the residential at Glen-

74. Trapman cited in “Mrs. Trapman Tells of Life in Long Bay. ‘I Had a Happy Time out There.’ Met Mrs. Mort and Man-Woman Eugene Falleni, Gaol's Famous Inmates. Mother Was Sold at Sixteen for £500,” *Truth*, November 11, 1928, 1, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

75. Moran gives Falleni's age at the time of his visit as fifty-four, placing the event in 1929; Herbert Michael Moran, *Viewless Winds: Being the Recollections and Digressions of an Australian Surgeon* (London: P. Davies, 1939), 234.

76. Moran, *Viewless Winds*, 233; 235; 232; 243; 249.

77. “One of Strangest Women Criminals Known to World Set Free,” *Truth*, February 22, 1931, 1, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; “Class Conscious Prisoners out at ‘the Bay,’” *Truth*, August 10, 1930.

78. Corbett, “Man-Woman Eugene Fallini Makes Appeal for Freedom,” 1.

79. “Eugene Falleni, Man-Woman, Acts as Hostess,” *Truth*, May 18, 1930, 15, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

80. “Was Eugene Falleni Guilty of Murder? Noted Criminologist Who Had Grave Doubts; Woman Freed from Gaol,” *Evening News*, February 19, 1931, 5, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; “One of Strangest Women Criminals Known to World Set Free,” *Truth*, February 22 1931.

81. Moran, *Viewless Winds*, 250.

more Road for £105. Thornton signed the contract of sale on her behalf as, Thornton said, “she could neither read nor write.” At 8pm that evening, with £100 in her bag, Ford suddenly stepped down from a high curb onto Oxford St, lost her balance, looked to the left instead of the right, and was struck by a car driven by William Lamb, a carpenter from Bexley. She was taken to Sydney Hospital where she passed away from the associated injuries on either June 9 or 10, 1938. The police received a report from a woman suggesting that Ford might be Falleni, and sent Detective-Sergeant Watkins, present at her arrest 18 years earlier, to take her fingerprints. The prints confirmed the identity of Ford as Eugenia Falleni.<sup>82</sup>

Jean Ford’s funeral was held at 2pm on Saturday June 11.<sup>83</sup>

At an inquest into the motor accident, Thornton said, “On one occasion she told me her name was Eugene Falleni, that she was born in Italy, and was taken when six months old to New Zealand. From New Zealand she went to England. She spoke of being in England at Queen Victoria’s Jubilee [presumably the diamond jubilee in 1897]. So far as I know she had no relatives in Australia.” Police informed the inquest that her granddaughter [Rita] was said to be living in a convent in Narrellan.<sup>84</sup>

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EUGENIA FALLENI, ACCORDING TO EUGENIA FALLENI

Falleni was illiterate and never wrote her own versions of her life story. Considering that she was described by her daughter as “always very reticent about herself,” she possibly would never have wanted to, either.<sup>85</sup> The closest we have to her versions of her life stories are summarised by people she met who asked about her past, and three transcriptions of her speech, each taken in moments that required her to overcome her reticence and speak, albeit with particular objectives in mind, under extraordinary pressure, and within certain limitations.

The first of such transcriptions is what Harry Crawford supposedly told the police in a ‘voluntary’ statement given an hour or so after he was met by detectives at the Empire Hotel on the morning of July 5, 1920, and brought back to C.I.B. Sydney for questioning. In the version published in *Evening News*, Crawford said he had been asked to give a voluntary statement, and consented. He said he was born Harry Leo Crawford in Edinburgh, Scotland, had moved to Wellington, New Zealand at eighteen months of age, and at nineteen years had come “direct” to Sydney on board the S.S. *Australia*. After years of working in various hotels and boarding houses, he finally met his only friend since arriving in Sydney: his wife, Lizzie.

Crawford’s story is tailored for, and determined by, its context, and is easy to destabilise as a reliable source, not only of Harry Crawford’s past, but of what Harry Crawford actually told the police, and how, and why. Crawford’s intentions in telling this version of his past were to provide police with a history that was compatible with the history those who knew Harry Crawford had been told, lest they should also be questioned. He needed to create a plausible

82. “Curtain on Man-Woman. Falleni Inquest,” *Truth*, July 3, 1938, 19, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

83. “Funerals,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 11, 1938, 15, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

84. “Curtain on Man-Woman,” *Truth*, July 3, 1938.

85. “Eugene Falleni. Daughter in the Box,” *Daily Telegraph*, August 20, 1920.

past for a working class male of Scottish heritage, one that could accommodate some of his own employment and residential history, while sounding mundane enough not to arouse interest from the police. Crawford also would have given his ‘voluntary’ statement in a state of great anxiety, in an atmosphere of high uncertainty. He did not know his rights. Even if he had been told that he was voluntarily choosing to give his statement, he was surrounded by police, had no lawyer present, and would have presumed he had no other choice. He did not know if he was under arrest. He did not know that police knew he was/had been an Italian woman christened Eugenia Falleni. He did not know *what* they knew, or what was about to happen to him. He was so ignorant of the law he presumed he “would have to go to gaol” after refusing a medical examination whilst not under arrest.<sup>86</sup>

Harry Crawford’s statement would have been one half of an interview between Robson and Crawford, however we do not know what Robson’s questions were, or how they were asked. We do know that Detective Sergeant Stuart Robson was, four days before Falleni’s arrest, called before a NSW State commission into police conduct over the arrest (which resulted in the hanging) of two socialists four years earlier.<sup>87</sup> It is possible, then, that Crawford’s statement to police was doctored—not least to cover the police for their own infringement of the law in not immediately taking Crawford to the police court and supplying him with legal aid before making him give his statement. What stands out in the statement on a second reading is the lengthy preamble in which Harry Crawford twice states that his statement is voluntary. This may be a formality, but knowing the degree of corruption rife at the Central Investigation Bureau in 1920s Sydney, the word “voluntary” appears suspiciously emphasised.

The second example of directly transcribed speech from Falleni is her statement from the dock, which opened the case for the accused during her trial:

Your Honor and Gentlemen of the Jury. I have been three months in Long Bay Gaol and with this terrible charge hanging over my head and I am real nervous.

(The accused was asked to speak up and continued her statement as follows).

Your Honor and Gentlemen of the Jury. I have been three months in Long Bay Gaol. I am a real nervous breakdown. I would like to make a statement but my constitution will not allow me. I do not know anything at all about this charge. I am perfectly innocent. I do not know what made the woman leave her home. We never had any serious rows, only just a few words but nothing to speak of, so therefore I am absolutely innocent of this charge that is over me.<sup>88</sup>

That Falleni gave such a pitifully short statement from the dock (or indeed, that she gave a statement from the dock at all) is described by Tedeschi as being an “ignominious beginning to the defence case.” Tedeschi explains that in the 1920s the accused in such a trial would have had three options: to give evidence (and thus be subject to cross-examination by the Crown),

86. Falleni cited by Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 81.

87. “I.W.W. Commission Detective Fergusson’s Report Officials’ Futile Search,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 1, 1920, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

88. Falleni in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 86.

to not give evidence, or to make an unsworn, unprompted statement from the dock. In giving a statement from the dock Falleni would have the opportunity to present her version of events to the jury, and present herself as being of good character, while avoiding cross-examination by one of the best barristers at the NSW bar. However this choice meant that McDonnell would not be able to give an opening address, that he would not be able to guide Falleni through her statement by asking leading questions (though he would be permitted to give one or two topic reminders at the end of Falleni's statement) and the jury might read Falleni's avoidance of cross-examination as an admission of guilt.<sup>89</sup> Tedeschi concedes that it is impossible to know how thoroughly McDonnell briefed Falleni prior to the delivery of her dock statement. Tedeschi is, however, "dumbstruck" by the fact that McDonnell did not, after Falleni had finished making her statement, prompt her to say anything else.<sup>90</sup> But there are two redeeming possibilities for McDonnell that Tedeschi did not entertain: perhaps McDonnell did not encourage her to continue speaking because he could see how distressed his client had become, or perhaps he hoped her visible fragility might endear her to the jury. In any case, the fact that he subsequently only called one witness, in contrast to the Crown's twenty-seven, does not redeem his reputation as an advocate.

The witness who closed the case for the crown was Detective-Sergeant Stuart Robson, and the climax of his testimony was the revelation—and dramatic presentation before court—of Falleni's alleged dildo, alongside the gun with two discharged cartridges found in the same portmanteau. Visually, the presentation of a dildo beside a gun (which could not be connected to Annie's death and therefore should not have been admitted as evidence) would have startled the court, especially the overcrowded, curious gallery. To be confronted so publicly with an object that was supposedly kept secret from even the most intimately connected people in her life would most likely have caused extreme distress for the "reticent" Falleni. That directly afterwards she should be required to make a statement from the dock—for which the stakes were literally life and death—would have compounded this distress. It is no wonder she spoke barely audibly, and could only say she was "a real nervous breakdown". That she also said "I would like to make a statement but my constitution will not allow me," suggests she *had* planned to make a more in-depth statement, but was, in that moment, physically incapable of doing so. With the exception of an opinion piece in *Smith's Weekly*, the newspapers did not cover the revelation of the dildo in Falleni's trial, and the accused's decorum, tone, or expression of feeling is not documented in the transcript, except via asides that the accused "was asked to speak up."<sup>91</sup> One can only speculate on why this is all Falleni chose to, or could, say.

Context and emotional state aside, what we *do* learn from Falleni's statement from the dock is that she insists upon her innocence, states she and Annie Birkett only had a few, minor arguments, and that "the woman" left her home, implying she was not (or did not want the jury to believe she was) ever in the park with Annie. Tedeschi explains that McDonnell may

---

89. Tedeschi, *Eugenia*, 176–177.

90. *Ibid.*, 178.

91. The Man in the Mask, "The Falleni Tragedy. The Sydney Female Masquerader Now under Sentence of Death," *Smith's Weekly*, October 16, 1920, 17; for an excellent analysis of the power this silence had, see Ruth Ford, "'The Man-Woman Murderer': Sex Fraud, Sexual Inversion and the Unmentionable 'Article' in 1920s Australia," *Gender and History* 12.1 (April 2000): 180; 189.

have been hamstrung by his client's insistence that she was not in the park when the Crown presented three (albeit unreliable) sighting witnesses suggesting that she was. This might explain why McDonnell only called one witness for the defence. However, Tedeschi argues that it is not the defence's responsibility to present a cohesive alternative sequence of events for the jury, but rather to destabilise the Crown's case—and if this means “arguing hypothetical positions that are contrary to the defence case” or pointing out to a jury “where there are gaps or weaknesses in the prosecution case, even if that is inconsistent with [the accused's] instructions” then this is what the defence must do (184).

Falleni did not give any interviews after the trial until 1929, when she consented to speak with Dr Moran, and 1930, when she spoke with J. D. Corbett of *Smith's Weekly*.<sup>92</sup> Her decision to give interviews coincided with a push to have Falleni released from Long Bay Gaol, led by Dorothy Mort and her friends. While what Falleni said in her interview with Moran is paraphrased in his account, Moran's own musings on the prison surroundings, Falleni's crime, her trial and his hypothesis that her “sexual inversion” was a medical, congenital condition overshadow her contribution to their conversation and his chapter.<sup>93</sup> Corbett, on the other hand, quotes her directly, and at length.

Falleni's behaviour during Corbett's interview has all the hallmarks of being carefully staged. He writes that throughout the interview Jean fluttered “a little pink handkerchief, neatly-ironed, carefully folded, delicate, essentially feminine”. Towards the end of the interview she “sobbed silently” and was comforted by friends. A nun stood in the doorway, watching on. This performance had a purpose: “Fallini [*sic*] ... makes a humble, feminine gesture of entreaty. She beseeches her freedom. She does not want to die in gaol.”<sup>94</sup>

When Corbett quotes Jean directly, she is revealed to have a keen sense of the injustice of her treatment, especially in comparison to Mrs Mort's:

“Nearly ten years ago, I was convicted on circumstantial evidence,” she said. “I did not have a chance. I had no education. I was what other people made me. Mrs. Mort had advantages that I never had. They said she was insane, but she was no more insane than I was. I think if we were weighed in the justice scales they would be down on my side. But she goes, and I have to stay here.”<sup>95</sup>

When Corbett paraphrases, however, he glosses over her thoughts on the trial, and reveals his own condescending opinion that she does not properly understand the difference between her case and that of Mrs Mort:

---

92. At some point during her time at Long Bay she allegedly spoke with the journalist Harry Cox, however this interview was not referred to in an article until after her death at least eight years later. In Cox's article she somewhat implausibly admitted she “had to do it, because she had no choice,” though what ‘it’ was, Cox never clarified; Harry Cox, “The Man-Woman Killer; the Thirty Year Masquerade,” *The Sun-Herald*, June 11, 1961, 27.

93. Moran, *Viewless Winds*, 230–250.

94. Corbett, “Man-Woman Eugene Fallini Makes Appeal for Freedom,” 1.

95. *Ibid.*



Jean Fallini [*sic*] feels acutely what she regards as unfair discrimination. If Mrs. Mort can get her freedom, why can't she get hers?

Fine legal technicalities she sweeps aside. The different wording of the two sentences imposed means nothing to her. In her simple way she goes to the essence of things. Her viewpoint is that two women were imprisoned for killing; one has been released, and the other must remain.<sup>96</sup>

Corbett does not claim to present Falleni's viewpoint and insinuates he believes she was guilty as charged when he writes:

And, whatever were the circumstances of "Jean" Fallini's [*sic*] crime 12½ years ago— and the details were undoubtedly revolting—she is to-day undoubtedly a pathetic figure. She has been punished. She is still suffering. Is Authority willing to cry "Enough?" Would it be wise to grant her freedom?<sup>97</sup>

Corbett writes that it is *Smith's* intention to present Falleni's friends' [presumably Mrs Mort's friends'] viewpoint, which is: "that, having regard to all the circumstances of her case, the plain indication of sexual aberration and the environment in which she had been brought up, she has dearly paid for her offence; that she is approaching old age, and that it would be an act of grace to give her liberty." No mention is made of Annie's death, or Falleni's murder charge.

Instead of focusing on the circumstantial nature of the evidence used to convict Falleni, or her protestations of innocence, or the prejudicial treatment of Mrs Mort, when Corbett is not directly quoting Jean, he emphasises her new, learned or trained femininity, as if it was for a lack of femininity, and not murder, that she was originally incarcerated. She is described as "suffering", "simple", a "pathetic figure", a "frail little woman", "intensely obedient", a "bundle of femininity—nothing strident or raucous about her". An implicit argument emerges: that "Authority" should forgive and release her, because, for the crime of "sexual aberration" she has been reformed; she has learned to "suffer" like a woman.

It is only when Corbett allows Falleni—as Jean—to speak directly, that the case for her innocence is argued. Here, Jean gives *her* version of events surrounding Annie's disappearance, for the first time in the public record:

As to the women with whom she, as "Harry Crawford," went through the form of marriage, Jean did not speak at any length. "They were older than I, and they knew more than I did," she remarked tersely.

One was Annie Birkett, a widow. "We lived together at Drummoyne," said Jean. "But she drank too much. At last I told her that I was not going out working while she stayed at home drinking. So she left.

"That was in 1917. I did not see her come back, but half of her clothes were gone, so I sold the furniture and things and went to lodgings. I took her boy with me. I know I should have told the police.

"Three years later I was charged with murdering Annie Birkett. I never murdered her.

96. *Ibid.*

97. *Ibid.*

“Once as I waited outside the morgue I heard some hammering. It was a coffin being broken open. I was shown a skeleton and the police said, “This is the woman you murdered.”

“Then I came here and stayed. And I may never come out alive. Yes, they treat me well, but how can one be happy?”<sup>98</sup>

Corbett’s article is also useful for providing a summary of Jean Falleni’s version of her past. The summary, paraphrased by Corbett, covers the same period as Harry Crawford’s statement, but is, unsurprisingly, quite different:

According to her statements she was born in Leghorn, and as an infant came with her parents to New Zealand. When she was 19 she married one Martello. As a young woman she came to Australia with her daughter and went to live with a Mrs. D’Angeli in Double Bay. They became partners in a laundry business. But when Mrs. D’Angeli died from dropsy it was found that though she had made a will it was never signed, and Jean got nothing. So she decided to adopt male attire because she thought she could do more work as a man than as a woman. She worked for a Mr. Ritchie, who kept an hotel near Central Station, at the Perdriau Rubber Works, at the Meat Works, Balmain, and other places. She lost the little finger of her right hand at the meat works.<sup>99</sup>

By introducing Jean’s story with “according to her statements ...” Corbett emphasises the partiality of what follows. And indeed there are some aspects of this story that contradict historical records. It is interesting to see that some details can be verified, and yet the subtle variances are what arouse curiosity in the biographer. According to her sister-in-law, Olga Falleni, Eugenia was born in Ardenza, very close to Leghorn, otherwise known as Livorno, and according to newspaper records she moved to New Zealand as an infant.<sup>100</sup> She was also married at the age of 19, but according to her marriage certificate the man she married was not “Martello” but Braseli Innocente. According to Jean’s version of events, Falleni came to Australia after Josephine was already born, however according to Josephine Falleni’s birth certificate, Josephine was born almost exactly four years after her marriage to Innocente. If various New Zealand newspaper articles published in 1896 are indeed about Falleni (and are to be believed), Falleni left Innocente nine months after their marriage, in 1895. Perhaps a man named Martello is Josephine’s father out of wedlock, and she used her prior marriage to Innocente to legitimise Josephine’s birth, or minimise the perceived shame of rape. Although why she would choose to hold onto her rapist’s name as the name of her daughter’s father (and, according to some sources, her own surname) is perplexing.

Mrs D’Angeli [elsewhere referred to as DeAngelis, DeAnglis, and DeAngliss] makes an appearance here, as she does in Josephine Falleni’s statement to police. While Josephine told police that her mother “used to work for Grannie for a while, then leave her, and return in a few months,” in Jean’s version of events she was not an employee at D’Angeli’s laundry, but a partner entitled to a share of the sale of the business after she passed away. In this version, it

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid.

100. Falkiner, *Eugenia: a Man*, 215; 205.

is only after Jean “got nothing” from D’Angeli that she *chose* to “adopt male attire”. Here, Jean gives the same financial reason for her choice to live as a man that *Truth* reports she gave police shortly after her arrest.<sup>101</sup> I will discuss this position further in the later section ‘Was Falleni a transgender man?’ (page 72).

After her arrest, and until her death, Falleni maintained not only her innocence, but her insistence that she was not in the park with Annie on Eight Hour Day, 1917. This version of events, although only scantily detailed, *could* corroborate the versions she told neighbours and friends shortly after Annie’s disappearance; comments that were framed, at her trial, as lies:

- To George Robert Smith, on the evening of Friday September 28, 1917, Crawford mentioned that his wife had “cleared out with a plumber over in Balmain.”<sup>102</sup>
- To Harry Birkett, on the morning of Tuesday October 2, Crawford mentioned that his mother had “gone to North Sydney with a Mrs Murray and her daughter.”<sup>103</sup>
- To George Parnell, a few days after Eight Hour Day, he said “that is the bugger, that is her,” when George read him a news story about a burned woman found at Chatswood.<sup>104</sup>
- To Henrietta Schieblich, later in October or November, 1917, he said “I had a jolly good row with her and gave her a crack on the head and she cleared.”<sup>105</sup>
- To Emma Belbin, he said that his wife had left him and gone to the country; that she used to drink and he would not have her back again.<sup>106</sup>

It is the contradictory nature of these statements that made Crawford appear to be lying, and thus guilty. And it was these “lies”—his later stories to neighbours and friends that he had seen Annie, or had been living with her, as well as the evidence of three sighting witnesses who claim they saw Crawford in the bush near where the charred body was found—that ended up convicting Falleni of Annie’s murder.

With a little imaginative coercion, Falleni’s version of events could be compatible with what she allegedly told witnesses. Annie and Crawford could have fought, and Annie could have threatened to leave. Crawford may have presumed Annie was going away with a plumber they knew, and Annie could have told him she was going to stay with a Mrs Murray in North Sydney. The argument might have escalated into a physical fight, during which Crawford could have given Annie a blow to her head. She might have screamed, fallen back, and perhaps he went for a walk to cool down, but returned to find she was not home. When he heard about the body on the banks of the Lane Cove River, perhaps he presumed she had committed suicide.

---

101. “A Startling Story. Woman Who Masqueraded as a Man. Eugene Falleni and Her ‘Wives’. Annie Birkett’s Death at Chatswood. Coronial Inquiry Recalled,” *Truth*, July 11, 1920, 9, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

102. Smith in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 62.

103. Birkett in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 5.

104. Parnell in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 58.

105. Schieblich in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 68.

106. Belbin in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 46.

This is only one of the many ways in which Crawford's apparently contradictory explanations for his missing wife could be recombined to tell a cohesive narrative. This version is based on the unlikely assumption that none of the witnesses lied, misremembered what Crawford had told them three years prior, or bent the truth in order to be more useful to police. Whether we deem Crawford's, and later Jean's, versions to be more plausible than other explanations of Annie's disappearance and probable death is not the point. The point is—and this has been emphasised by almost all of her biographers—we do not know what happened. And if we do not know, and Falleni's version of events cannot be *disproved* beyond reasonable doubt, it must continue to be treated as a *possible* explanation of events.

## EUGENIA FALLENI IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The years leading up to the centenary of Annie Crawford's disappearance have seen a resurgence of interest in Falleni's story. In 2012 Mark Tedeschi Q.C. published the true crime biography *Eugenia: A True Story of Adversity, Tragedy, Crime and Courage*, while in 2014 Lachlan Philpott's play, *The Trouble with Harry*, was produced for the Melbourne International Arts Festival, and Suzanne Falkiner's 1988 book *Eugenia: a Man* was re-published with revisions and a new chapter. All three works offer original insights into Falleni's story, in particular how the 'unknowns' in her case might be reimagined by authors writing with the benefit, and hindrance, of almost one hundred years' hindsight. All three authors grapple with the various mysteries and contradictions of Falleni's story—not least Falleni's own "reticence"—and arrive at very different methods to negotiate these epistemological problems.

Suzanne Falkiner's *Eugenia: a Man* was the first full-length biography of Falleni and remains the most factually reliable. Falkiner's take on the story is notable for its acknowledgment of uncertainty, in particular its awareness of its own (and indeed any biography's) limitations as a comprehensive account of Falleni's life. Although she writes in the afterword to her revised, 2014 edition that her "aim, then as now, was not to speak for Eugenia, but to try to establish the verifiable facts where possible," she is more than aware that those "facts" are buried in sources that are often contradictory and fictitious.<sup>107</sup> In a reflective passage mid-way through her book, Falkiner writes:

What was I hoping to achieve, I wondered, by trying to deduce Eugenia from dry scraps of paper, aged official documented sensational newspaper accounts, all of which represented their own form of fiction? Was it possible to build a construct from the outside, and hope that the shape which resulted might somehow correspond with the shape that was Eugenia?

And yet, it seemed to me, no aspiring biographer, no matter how skilled, can define a person, once they are dead, beyond the traces they have left in the material world. With more self-conscious subjects, and those with an eye on posterity, these traces are often the ones they wish to leave. With Eugenia this was also true, and yet not true at all. (187)

---

107. Falkiner, *Eugenia: a Man*, 280. All future page references will be given in the text.

*Eugenia: a Man* focuses, then, on the traces Falleni left in the historical record, and the questions those traces raise, but resists offering an authoritative explanation for how these traces came to be left.

Written in the first person, Falkiner uses her own research journey as her narrative arc. She reveals her research to the reader in the same order that it became available to her, and Falleni's character gradually came into view. Starting with her discovery of Falleni's story in Moran's memoir, Falkiner then reflects upon various newspaper articles she read at the State Library of NSW, summarises the trial transcript, and reports on trips to Ardenza and Wellington. She transcribes and summarises conversations with Falleni's remaining relatives, and interweaves her own reflections between her research. Falkiner uses herself-as-character to freely admit when she does not know enough to state something definitively. This first person position also allows Falkiner to personably and explicitly engage in a discussion on the ethical implications of adding herself (and her readers) to a list of countless other curious onlookers, thrilled by the "eccentricities" of Falleni's life (118–119). Falkiner is free with her use of modal verbs and adverbs such as "might", "possibly" and "perhaps", however the effect is not one of anxious caution, but careful curiosity.

Falkiner's contribution to research on Falleni's life is possibly most significant for her interview with living members of Falleni's family. The daughter-in-law of one of Falleni's brothers wrote to Falkiner (197), as well as the son of one of Falleni's childhood friends (210–212). Falleni's elderly sister-in-law, Olga, spoke to Falkiner in person, connecting scant traces Falleni left in the historical record during her youth in New Zealand, and explaining her family's response to the coverage of her alleged crime (215–221). This research into Falleni's early life helped answer, or at least re-frame, the question of whether or not her choice to live as a man was made after her arrival in Sydney (and supposed rape), or was something she had felt compelled to do since childhood, suggesting a congenital disposition.

Falkiner is wary of speaking on behalf of Falleni. Towards the end of her book, Falkiner writes, "How Eugenia might have thought and felt herself was something that no one could venture to say." But she follows this statement with an admission: "And yet it had been impossible not to speculate" (221). Falkiner is careful to point to the frame of these speculations, either by writing about herself imagining Falleni, as in: "I tried to place Eugenia, a slim youth in a workman's cap, in the noisy, casual ambience of a Sydney hotel" (223), or by framing her speculations as a question: "As young Harry Crawford replaced the metal baskets of dirty glasses with clean ones and wiped down the counters, did he keep his eyes down and avoid conversation, drink a little whiskey and then a little more?" (224) The book posits many explanations for why Falleni was the way she was: perhaps she was a sociopath, perhaps she was transgender (243), perhaps she never lost a childlike love of chaos (195–196), perhaps she had a craving for freedom, and was brave enough to pursue it, or perhaps she had a violent and dominating father (243). Falkiner leaves these suppositions for the reader to consider, and subtly suggests Falleni was influenced by a complex of these reasons, as far as they can be understood today.

Mark Tedeschi's *Eugenia: A True Story of Adversity, Tragedy, Crime and Courage*, adopts a more assertive narrative style. The text is structured in three parts. Part one gives an account of Falleni's early life, beginning with her (alleged) rape on a Norwegian barque, before returning to her youth spent in New Zealand, and continuing on to tell of her quest for "love, acceptance, security, respect and connection with other human beings" (xiii) in Sydney, her "manslaughter" of Annie, and her subsequent arrest for Annie's murder. Part two tells the story of Falleni's hearing and murder trial, and analyses problematic aspects of both the prosecution's and defence's cases. Part three returns to the narrative mode used in part one to tell the story of Falleni's incarceration and release, and includes an analysis of Falleni's case in light of legal procedure and social perceptions of gender and crime today.

Tedeschi's choice to use a linear, third-person narrative mode in part one, and to a certain degree in parts two and three, does not afford him much flexibility when accommodating the inconsistencies, ambiguities and absences prevalent in the primary sources. But Tedeschi's aims are not the same as Falkiner's: he does not want to engage in an ethical discussion about what we can claim to know about Falleni and why we may want to know about her in the first place, he wants to argue a case for *how it was* for Falleni, so that we can better understand how society and the law failed her and may yet fail others. However, by not explicitly categorising part one's genre as fictional speculation (particularly in a work marketed as non-fiction) he undermines the serious contribution to scholarship on Falleni's case he makes in part two. Only someone familiar with the primary sources would begin to sense that part one reads like the summing up speech of a defence lawyer before a trial jury: there is no room for doubt in this version of events—indeed any doubts, inconsistencies or unknowns *not* beneficial to the defence's case are "glossed over", as Tedeschi later argues a defence lawyer should make it his practice to do.<sup>108</sup> But the speculative nature of Tedeschi's version of Falleni's early life, and its performance as a summing-up speech is invisible. To a reader unfamiliar with the sources, part one might read like the factual account of a well-researched, authoritative author who 'knows'.

Tedeschi is quick to establish his authority. In his introduction, he writes that *Eugenia* is written by a Queen's Counsellor "with the insight of more than thirty-five years' practice in the criminal courts for both the prosecution and the defence" (xiii). His self-assurance is emphasised by his choice of genre (third-person narrative 'true crime' non-fiction), by his publisher's choice to include Tedeschi's professional letters (Q.C.) after his name on the cover and title page of the book, and by choosing to preface, rather than follow, the narrative with a list of acknowledgements that prove the extensiveness of Tedeschi's research (x–xii). The word "perhaps" does not appear until page 37 of the book, and Tedeschi only rarely uses modal adverbs or adjectives that might admit doubt. In his introduction to the text, Tedeschi alerts readers to a few licenses he will take, in particular with regard to his scant referencing:

I could have provided footnotes or endnotes for the historical facts, but I believe that including numbered notes in a text creates a visual and psychological hurdle for the reader to overcome. For this reason, I have instead included a bibliography at the end of the book and I have only inserted numbered endnotes in the text where they are essential for an explanation. Where I have referred to personal thoughts and emotions, these

---

108. Tedeschi, *Eugenia*, 184. All future page references will be cited in text.

are generally inferred by me from the background factual circumstances in which they occurred. Most conversations are taken from police statements or evidence given in the committal proceedings and the trial. In those two instances (in chapters 1 and 8) where, in the absence of established facts, I have engaged in conjecture about significant events, I have clearly indicated that this is the case and stated the basis for my supposition. (xiv)

This note to the reader—while superficially appearing to acknowledge how the author has negotiated doubt—asks the reader to ignore her own doubts (in not requiring more footnotes), and give her trust over to the author, whose fabrications are “inferred” from fact. When he states that he has engaged in conjecture in two instances—the chapter on Falleni’s ‘rape’ (chapter one) and the chapter on Annie’s death (chapter eight)—the implication is that he has *only* engaged in conjecture in these two instances and not, as the case actually is, throughout the entire text. The “visual and psychological hurdle” Tedeschi argues readers have to overcome when encountering footnotes in a text might easily be their own belief/disbelief in a narrative, or dissatisfaction with narrative holes the sources do not cover. Tedeschi’s desire to “gloss over” the places these footnote-hurdles might otherwise mark should be a warning to readers interested in what actually happened to Falleni, rather than in what Tedeschi would like readers to believe happened. Tedeschi assures his readers that footnotes will be provided when an “explanation” is “essential”—but this turns out to be more often the case when he uses a word that has slipped out of common parlance, such as a “copper” used for laundry (22), and “portmanteau” (35), rather than at moments others might deem in essential need of explanation, such as when he plucks thoughts, feelings, and fact-like details seemingly out of the air and attributes them to Falleni’s life.

Tedeschi uses a range of narrative devices to convince the reader his version of Falleni’s life is the “true” account it purports to be. When fabricating “personal thoughts and emotions” he usually lists in threes or fours, as if he is itemising facts in a report. The ship that he claims brought “Eugene” to Australia was a “four-masted, iron-hulled Norwegian barque” (3), though he does not reference the *Sun* article he most likely drew these details from, or give any indication he has investigated the foundations of its dubious claims.<sup>109</sup> He writes that Falleni’s favourite sea ports “were Suva, Papeete and Honolulu” (4) and that Mrs DeAngelis had a reputation for being “loving, kind, gentle and motherly” (20) even though there is no indication of this in any source. Tedeschi writes that the father of Josephine’s child was “a sailor on a merchant ship who was almost a generation older than her, whom she had casually met and who, to her dismay, promptly disappeared before she even found out about the pregnancy” (36). However, the police gazette of May 27, 1914, states that the father of Josephine’s child was twenty-two-year-old Jack Coroneo (only six or seven years Josephine’s senior) who worked in an oyster saloon on King Street. Tedeschi presumably prefers a Freudian narrative in which Josephine, pining for her absent father, looks for a paternal likeness in the men she sleeps with—but again he gives no indication he is conscious of this preference. Tedeschi has not only invented the man’s employment and age, but adds that he is “almost” a generation older than Josephine—the word “almost” adding a truth-like precision to his fabricated detail.

109. The article Tedeschi most likely drew this information from is “Woman with Many ‘Wives,’” *Sun*, June 12, 1938, 2, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

Tedeschi's use of sources is the most misleading aspect of his "true" text. On one of the few occasions in which he has clearly indicated his source by changing the typesetting, formatting the excerpt as a block quote, and alerting the reader in an earlier footnote that "all such police conversations are taken verbatim from the evidence given by police" (note 3, 254), he embellishes the source, significantly changing its meaning, without indicating that he has done so:

Eugenia became very distressed and started shaking uncontrollably. Fighting back tears, she said to Constable Armfield, 'I can't possibly face her. Please tell her that I love her, but I can't possibly speak to her right now. I don't want her to see me like this.' Armfield asked her if she was sure about it, and Eugenia stated that she was. Armfield then returned to the waiting room and the following conversation took place.

*Armfield: I'm very sorry but she's not prepared to see you at this time. She asked me to tell you that she loves you, but she just can't speak to you right now.*

*Lizzie: (wailing bitterly) I just don't believe what you've told me. What have you done to my husband?*

*Watkins: (to Robson, but audible to everyone) I think you'd better show her what was in the suitcase. It's the only way you'll convince her. (93)*

The only comprehensive account of Falleni's arrest in primary sources is given by Detective Sergeant Stuart Robson at Falleni's trial. However, in Robson's version, no mention is made of Falleni's wife coming to the station after her arrest. In an interview given forty years after the event, Sergeant Lillian Armfield (who is never mentioned by Robson) told her biographer, Vince Kelly, that Falleni's wife came to the station at about 6 pm, wanting to speak to Crawford:

The woman, already in a state of collapse, would have fallen but for Lillian Armfield's quick support. "Get her a glass of water, please," she asked a constable. "We'll have to let her see Crawford and talk to him ... her."

But the prisoner refused to see the woman, and Robson murmured, "I think you'd better show her what was in the suitcase. It's the only way you'll convince her."

The suitcase was produced. The woman stared at its contents, then left the police-station without another word.<sup>110</sup>

Armfield's story, recorded by Kelly, is the only known source for this interaction between the police and Lizzie Crawford. While Tedeschi's Crawford begs Armfield to tell Lizzie that he loves her, Armfield's Crawford (and presumably Tedeschi's source) makes no mention of love, and sends no message—he simply refuses to see her.

Tedeschi's primary contribution to original research on Falleni's life is his thorough, expert analysis of how the press, police and legal system engaged with Annie Crawford's death and Falleni's subsequent trial in part two of *Eugenia*. It is also in this analysis—and perhaps as a result of the nature of 'analysis' itself—that Tedeschi finds a means of accommodating

110. Kelly, *Rugged Angel*, 143



doubt, admitting possibility, and the limitations of some, if not most, of his sources. Using his “over thirty-five years of experience in the criminal courts,” Tedeschi is able to imagine how the defence and the prosecution would have been inclined to structure their cases. Having a knowledge of the Local Police Court on Liverpool Street, Tedeschi is able to deduce that Detective Sergeant Stuart Robson walked Falleni from the cells to the police court via the outdoor courtyard, rather than through the internal corridor connecting the two buildings, in order to provide the press with a photo opportunity (95). As a result of Tedeschi’s insights on the legal system, future researchers can see how the first draft of Falleni’s story (documented in the trial transcript) was constructed by defence and Crown counsels of varying abilities and experience, and with conflicting objectives in mind.

What Tedeschi successfully suggests in part two is how extensively Falleni’s trial was troubled with uncertainty. He argues that the prosecution would have been aware of the uncertainties and contradictions inherent to their case, despite their confident performance in the press and in the court. And in analysing the case for the defence, Tedeschi reveals McDonnell’s shortcomings as an advocate by exploring a range of questions he *might have* asked, but did not (see, for example, 137). It is in part two that Tedeschi cracks open Falleni’s case, and not only exposes what might have happened but remains lost to history, but also what might have happened had Falleni been provided with a more experienced defence attorney. Unfortunately, the potential insights offered by the possibilities Tedeschi makes available are undermined by his own avoidance of doubt, doctoring of sources, and failure to address more compromising aspects of Falleni’s story in part one. Had he framed part one as a fiction or speculation, as opposed to a non-fictional account of what happened, his narrative assurance would not have been as ethically dubious.

Playwright Lachlan Philpott and director Alyson Campbell were so conscious of uncertainty and contradiction in the creation of their 2014 play *The Trouble with Harry* that “ambiguity” became a guiding principle of the production’s dramaturgy and design. In her introduction to the published edition of the text, Campbell writes:

Lachlan does not want to ‘normalise’ Falleni/Crawford; instead he accepts that we cannot know how life might have played out behind their door and that this ambiguity is to be embraced, rather than coming to some clear conclusion and imposing that as ‘the’ narrative. This perspective has led him to the very challenging task of interrogating and developing a (queer) dramaturgy that does not pin things down or provide answers and neat endings. One begins to perceive the origins of Philpott’s title: the unavoidable reference to Hitchcock’s film, certainly, but also to Judith Butler’s seminal feminist/queer text *Gender Trouble*. Lachlan is not interested in providing a single version of this story but in troubling easy assumptions that there is a single story to tell.<sup>111</sup>

---

111. Alison Campbell, introduction to Lachlan Philpott, *The Trouble With Harry* (London: Oberon Books, 2014), 10–11.

The play's preoccupation with ambiguity is evident in the cast list, when the character of Harry Crawford/ Falleni is described as "early forties, to be played by anybody but a biological male." Included here is the note that "*This play is a fluid dance. Nothing is fixed in place, nor should it be*".<sup>112</sup>

Philpott's conscious decision to "trouble" is most clearly at work in his choice to use two intrusive narrators—"Man" and "Woman"—as mediators between Falleni's story and the audience. In his character notes, Philpott writes:

*Man and Woman address us today and they inhabit both the same and a very different space. Their identities should not be fixed either. By this I mean they are not reporters, or neighbours or people who sat in the court. They are man and woman and they can walk through walls, freeze time, use microphones, cameras and other contemporary tools of surveillance.* (19)

Beyond their genders, "Man" and "Woman" are intentionally vague, although they can possibly best be understood as embodiments of the heteronormative worldview that has both shaped and framed Falleni's story to date. They belong to no particular time or place. They impart judgements, observe, mediate, and manipulate the narrative. They ask questions, and speculate upon the answers. They list binaries, which are later interrupted by the baffling crowing of a hen:

ANNIE: Cups and saucers/  
 WOMAN: Peas and beans/  
 MAN/WOMAN: Husbands and wives/  
 WOMAN: Love and hate.  
 MAN/WOMAN: The truth and the lies/  
 ANNIE: For a moment alone, just me. (25)

WOMAN: The births and the coffins.  
 The summer, the cold.  
 MAN: The dogs, the cats.  
 LENA crows. (76)

Man and Woman are metafictional devices. They point to the constructedness of their world by rearranging scenery, and replaying scenes. At times the narrators' speculations instruct the action on stage, and it is at these moments that the audience begins to understand that the Harry and Annie they have been watching are not being *commented upon* by the narrators, but rather *invented by* them. When Annie packs her bags after a visit from the police, and is confronted by Crawford, the narrators watch through the window and speculate on the conversation that they can see but not hear. Their speculations are played out by the very people they have been watching:

---

112. Lachlan Philpott, *The Trouble With Harry*, 19. All future page references will be cited in text.

MAN: And through the slit in the curtains I can make them out. Is he saying?  
 CRAWFORD: Packed your things again I see Annie.  
 ANNIE returns and faces CRAWFORD.  
 WOMAN: What's being said?  
 MAN: Something like this?  
 ANNIE: That girl is a plague she always brings trouble. The police came today. I'm not having the boy raised around this.  
 MAN: Or something like this?  
 ANNIE: They came today looking for Falleni.  
 CRAWFORD: How would they ...  
 ANNIE: Maybe the dead woman planned it all. Mix up some name in a letter to plant a seed of doubt so they investigate. All they need to do is knock on the door and every neighbour's tongue is wagging.  
 CRAWFORD: She wouldn't have ...  
 ANNIE: Wouldn't she? Everybody watches us. Will we have to live like rats ... hidden in the dark?  
 WOMAN: Or this?  
 MAN: Maybe it's like this?  
 CRAWFORD: Tell me about what?  
 ANNIE: It's nothing at all love. A copper came to the door looking for some foreigner.  
 CRAWFORD: A foreigner?  
 ANNIE: An Italian. Odd mistake—but the way people move about, guess they just had the wrong address ... (59–60)

This re-playing of possible scenes is *The Trouble with Harry's* most distinctive structural feature, and yet curiously Philpott only utilises this device when reimagining scenes he has invented himself. A visit from the police is not documented in source materials as having preceded Annie's 'disappearance'. Philpott has to invent this visit in the absence of knowing what triggered Annie's decision to leave. Falleni's rape, however, is told directly to the audience by Crawford, in a rare soliloquy unmediated by the narrators. Despite being one of the most factually precarious events in Falleni's now-mythologised story, her rape is one of the few episodes of Falleni's narrative told, in Philpott's play, with fact-like certainty. One is left to ask: is Philpott's doubling of scenes motivated by an ethical desire to challenge the authority of unfounded aspects of Falleni's story, or a lack of assurance in his own inventions?

In the absence of any defining character traits, the dramaturgical function of Philpott's narrators is transparent, any imagery they reference becomes emphatically symbolic (the hen/cock), and more often than not their dialogue is over-burdened with unwieldy abstract nouns. Take, for instance, the last five lines of the play:

WOMAN: The truths/  
 MAN: The lies/  
 WOMAN: The husbands/  
 MAN: The wives.  
 Beat.  
 MAN/WOMAN: The silence. (90)

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Philpott is less successful at engaging with the story's ambiguities when he meets them with vagaries of his own. He is far more successful in 'troubling' the received version of Falleni's story when he presents a confident, grounded, unambiguous alternative.

What Campbell and Philpott are certain of is that they will *not* present a heteronormative version of Harry and Annie's relationship (9). In *The Trouble with Harry*, Annie knows she is not married to a man. When Annie tells Crawford she plans to leave, Crawford tells Annie, "I can't survive without you." Annie replies, "You'll find another if that's what you want. You can spot them. You found me" (87). In Philpott's play, Annie is not the un-knowing, innocent, heteronormative 'wife' lied to by a sexual deviant that the prosecution, and the newspapers of 1920s Sydney, would have us believe. And it is not Annie's 'discovery' of Harry's sex that leads to Annie's death, but Annie's decision to end the relationship because of a gradual accumulation of outward pressures, in particular Josephine's precocious behaviour, and curiosity from the neighbours (87).

Philpott's original contribution to Falleni's story—his queer dramaturgy, and intention to 'trouble' assumptions about Annie and Crawford's relationship—is undermined by factual distortions and inaccuracies. Philpott has the Crawford family live together on Cathedral Street, and not The Avenue in Drummoyne. He may have chosen to set the action on a *symbolic* Cathedral Street as a reminder that Christian ideals of 'decency' were a more pronounced aspect of cultural lore in 1917 Sydney, or he may have chosen to set the action on *actual* Cathedral Street, Woolloomooloo (where Falleni later lived with Harry Birkett *after* Annie's disappearance) to exaggerate Crawford's class status. Philpott's Cathedral Street features piles of burning garbage; its houses are visibly overrun by bed bugs, fleas and rats (24). The effect of this particular distortion ends up obfuscating a more interesting tension that already exists in Falleni's story: if Crawford and Annie had lived in Woolloomooloo, an area inhabited by the very poor, the drug or alcohol-addicted, sex workers and other social outcasts, Crawford's 'passing' may have been more readily accepted, or at least maintained less vigilantly. The pressure to appear 'socially acceptable' would have been more intense in suburban Drummoyne, populated by working and lower-middle class families.

Philpott readily fills gaps in his research with his own inventions. Almost all of Philpott's inventions serve more than one purpose—they connect plot points, bridge absences in known facts or patchy research, and emphasise themes of interest to Philpott and the production's creative team. Falleni only begins to dress as a man after her father dies and she wears his clothes (65–66)—a particularly Freudian invention for a text concerned with troubling received gender norms. Philpott has a significantly younger (or developmentally challenged) Harry Birkett find Crawford dealing with menstrual blood in the dunny (67), and Philpott's Josephine falls pregnant to Danny, an employee at a fun fair rife with bearded ladies (50). Had Philpott, to return to Hilary Mantel, "drawn the drama out of real life" rather than "put it there, like icing on a cake", his inventions may not have needed to argue their cases so emphatically, on both figurative and literal levels. He may not have needed to rely quite so heavily on the six o'clock swill (26) and other clichéd details of historical life in Sydney. Philpott's drama—and Falleni's trauma—does not emerge from the difficult-to-resolve tensions in the

sources, or an attempt to understand what actually happened to Falleni. Instead, *The Trouble with Harry*'s weak factual grounding and heavy-handed thematic emphasis turns Falleni's story into an allegory retrofitted to pre-conceived thematic concerns.

While Philpott successfully troubles heteronormative assumptions about Annie's sexuality, he has not troubled other assumptions that have been absorbed into the myth that has become Falleni's story. Had Philpott's research been more thorough, he could have applied his queer dramaturgy to aspects of Falleni's story which have been coloured by the heteronormative world view he claims to resist, and made a serious, critical intervention into the history of her case.

## WHAT REMAINS UNKNOWN

The recent digitisation of archival materials by libraries and government departments in both Australia and New Zealand has meant that facts about Falleni have been easier to search for and recover. New source materials are available on a regular basis, and this gives researchers a motivating sense that the pool of possibilities for how it was for Falleni, and those intimate with her, is narrowing. And yet all of Falleni's researchers have acknowledged the unknowability of some of the most significant moments in Falleni's life—in particular how Josephine was conceived, and how Annie came to die. In the absence of facts, many of her biographers have relied on apocryphal stories reported by newspapers throughout the twentieth-century. In this section, I will draw attention to the questions that remain contentious, and attempt to distinguish between fact and hearsay.

### HOW DID FALLENI TRAVEL TO AUSTRALIA AND WHO IS JOSEPHINE'S FATHER?

After Falleni's arrest the story of how she arrived in Australia, and how Josephine was conceived, evolved on a weekly basis. The first version of Falleni's history is reported by *Evening News* as having been "told by herself to the police." This version claims that:

She is 45 and a native of Italy, where she married a man named Martello, afterwards going with him to New Zealand. They lived there for some time, but later she left that country for Australia, leaving her husband behind, but bringing a daughter with her. In Australia she adopted male attire, being known at varying times as Eugene Martello, Eugene Falleni, Harry Crawford, and Harry Leon Crawford.<sup>113</sup>

A little over a week later, *Truth* reported that:

each day the police inquiries have unravelled the mystery a little more, and now it is alleged that Falleni, who, it is also alleged, is a native of Italy, and of Italian parentage, went

---

113. "The Man-Woman Police Inquiries Proceeding Two Women's Histories," *Evening News*, July 7, 1920, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

to New Zealand with her mother and father when a girl. It is believed that there she first met Martello, who was the captain of an Italian vessel, and became very much attached to him; so much so that she left her parents to become his wife.

They sailed in his vessel, it is alleged, with the only child of the union, Josephine, and Falleni and the girl were landed at Newcastle. At this point, Martello and his movements fade out of the story.<sup>114</sup>

After Falleni's death in 1938, the mystery of how Falleni evolved from a wayward girl in New Zealand to a reluctant cross-dressing mother in Australia began to be embellished by eager journalists. The word "allegedly" fades from reports as popular myth becomes solid as fact. In 1938 *The Sun* reported that:

At the age of 15 she joined a Norwegian barque as a cabin boy, but was put off the ship at Newcastle when her sex was discovered.<sup>115</sup>

In 1952 *The Sunday Times* of Western Australia reported that:

Finally in a fit of rebellion, dressed in a shirt and long trousers, the husky girl persuaded the captain of a vessel to accept her as a cabin-boy.

On her first voyage it is said she fell prey to a lusty seaman who discovered her secret. And when the ship berthed at Newcastle, pseudo-cabin-boy Falleni went ashore with a baby born at sea.<sup>116</sup>

It is now almost considered fact that Falleni was raped at sea on board a Norwegian barque by a Captain Martello. In *Eugenia*, Tedeschi confidently immerses his reader into a six page-long description of the event. He begins by painting a scene in which the Italian captain invites the boy Eugene into his cabin to converse in Italian, suspecting Eugene to be of Italian heritage. After Eugene accidentally ends a word with the feminine as opposed to masculine ending, the captain then becomes suspicious of Eugene's sex. He invites Eugene to his cabin again, this time to drink whiskey, and after she has drunk three tumblers full, Martello chokes her, gropes between her legs, kicks her semi-conscious, then violently rapes her (8–9). Tedeschi does preface his depiction of Falleni's rape with the small disclaimer that "the exact details of what happened are not known, but it must have been something like this" (5). But how *must* it have happened like that, if the details are not known? Tedeschi elaborates in a lengthy footnote:

Dr Herbert Moran, who met Eugenia four times, describes the event on the ship thus: 'It is said that the Captain, having surprised the secret of her sex, used her violently and then abandoned her in her pregnancy' (*Viewless Winds*, p 243). He refers to it as 'the brutal deflowering by a violent man'. There is not the slightest suggestion that she had any sexual inclinations towards men at any other time, either before she went to sea or after

114. "The Female 'Husband'. Eugene Falleni Again in Court. More About Her Movements and Acquaintance with Captain Martello," *Truth*, July 18, 1920, 7, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

115. "Woman with Many 'Wives,'" *Sun*, June 12, 1938, 2, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

116. "Her 'Husband' Was a Woman and a Murderess," *Sunday Times*, March 30, 1952, 4, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

she left the ship. The discovery of Eugene's femaleness inevitably resulted in her being put off the ship at the next convenient port, which was the last thing that she would have wanted. Harry Cox, a journalist who interviewed Eugenia in 1931, wrote in 1961, 'Only one seaman, an Italian named Martello, probed her secret. As they talked together in Italian he caught a word here and there that revealed her sex.' (*Sun-Herald*, 11 June 1961, p 27). Josephine Falleni, in a police statement which was summarised by the newspapers, said that she had been told by her foster mother that her father was the captain of a ship ... (251)

Reading this, I am frustrated with questions. Why does Tedeschi base his scene on sources that are compromised by inaccuracies and assumptions of their own? Who is this "Captain Martello", and is there any evidence that he existed? Where are the facts to support the claims made by Tedeschi and the authors of his sources, or at least, in the absence of facts, the admission that the story of her rape might be based on a series of assumptions, maybe even *desires*, that the later events of her life had a tragic cause?

Returning to Tedeschi's first cited source, we can begin to tease out why writers have tended to believe Falleni was "violently used". In *Viewless Winds*, Dr Moran wrote:

It is said that the captain, having surprised the secret of her sex, used her violently and then abandoned her in her pregnancy. This incident, if true (and no one can disprove it), must rank high in importance when we assess the relative value of the causal factors of her subsequent behaviour ... At the very least, it must have hardened a tendency: it surely must have sown a bitterness.<sup>117</sup>

Dr Moran does point to the anecdotal foundation of the sea-faring chapter of Falleni's story with the qualification "it is said". But Moran's claim that "no one can disprove" the story is curious. That no one can *prove* it, either, should surely be of equal, if not more, importance. To emphasise lack of *disprovability* indicates a desire on Moran's part to believe the story to be true. Why? What follows gives us a clue. It "must rank high in importance when we assess the relative value of the causal factors of her subsequent behaviour." In other words, her "hardened tendency"—supposedly to desire women, or rather, to *not* desire men—makes more sense to a medically trained imagination if a cause can be attached to it. "Abnormal" symptoms *must* have a cause.

When analysing the article by Harry Cox, Tedeschi's second cited source, other factual inconsistencies present themselves. In 1961 journalist Harry Cox wrote an exposé of his "strangest murder cases" for *The Sun-Herald*. Cox reportedly visited Falleni at Long Bay Penitentiary in 1931, and asked her what her motive was—whether for living as a man, or for murdering Annie Birkett, Cox conveniently doesn't stipulate—to which she replied, "that she had to do it, that there was nothing else".<sup>118</sup> An unlikely admission from a woman who was at that time campaigning for her release from prison and had, up until that day and afterwards, vehemently maintained her innocence.

Cox's version of her time at sea is as follows:

117. Moran, *Viewless Winds*, 243.

118. Cox, "The Man-Woman Killer," 27.

Her early error was in shipping as a cabin boy on a Norwegian barque trading from New Zealand around the Pacific. She was then 16.

[...]

In the cramped intimacy of a windjammer's forecabin there were, fortunately for her, no such niceties as changing into pyjamas to sleep. So, for just on six years, she was generally accepted as a male, became toughened up like a male.

Only one seaman, an Italian named Martello, probed her secret. As they talked together in Italian he caught a word here and there that revealed her sex.

Eugene Falleni might have remained at sea for the rest of her life, but discovered she was pregnant to Martello.

She left the ship in Newcastle in 1899, never to see Martello again.<sup>119</sup>

Cox has Falleni leave New Zealand at the age of sixteen, which would place the event in the year 1891 or 1892. A little digging in the archives reveals, however, that if she did go to sea at age sixteen, she returned to marry Innocente in 1894, to live in the Pauline Home in 1895, and be called before the Masterton court in 1896, when she was twenty-one.

There is no available evidence in the patchy NSW shipping records of a Captain Martello ever having helmed a ship, let alone a Norwegian barque around the time of December 1897, when Josephine was conceived. However, in a new chapter added to the 2014 edition of *Eugenia: a Man*, Suzanne Falkiner suggests that the "Captain Martello" of Falleni's story may be Captain Norman Martorell, misprinted in a 1916 newspaper as "Captain Martello" after his tramp steamer, the *Flamenco*, sank on route to Chile. Captain Martorell was of Spanish descent, but born in Liverpool, England, around 1867. In 1897 he was second mate on board the *Orotava*, which sailed from the UK via the Suez canal, Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne, Hobart and Sydney before arriving in New Zealand. Falkiner adds that "if Eugenia were on board, she may have made a round trip to Britain before being put ashore again in Australia" (274). Falkiner is not sure, however, of Martorell's role as rapist: "Had second mate Norman Martorell merely befriended Eugenia, and inspired her to use his name? Or was he indeed Josie's father?" (275)

Second and third-hand information, provided by people who spoke to Falleni directly, suggests she may have been raped on board a steamship and that she may have been in the UK in 1897. The son of Falleni's friend in Wellington, Nellie Matthews, told Falkiner:

the last time that she met my mother, Tally-Ho told her that she was going to work her way as a stoker on a ship to Australia, which she did. After she arrived in Australia she [or someone who wrote for her] wrote to my mother saying she had arrived safe and that she hardly slept at all on board ship and kept an iron bar under her pillow for protection. (211–212)

Nancy Cracknell, step-sister to Rita Whitby (and daughter of Arthur Whitby's second wife), told Falkiner that she believed Josephine was born "after a sailor forced his way into the bathroom" on a ship (264). And Jean Ford's business partner, William Thornton, had been told

---

119. Ibid.



that “from New Zealand she went to England” in time for Queen Victoria’s jubilee.<sup>120</sup> Queen Victoria’s diamond jubilee took place on June 20, 1897. Falleni’s last recorded trace in New Zealand was in July the year prior, and her first recorded trace in Sydney was in September, 1898. Falleni could conceivably have boarded a steamer in New Zealand shortly after her court case in Masterton, traveled to the UK, witnessed the jubilee, conceived Josephine in the bathroom of a ship in December 1897, and returned in time to give birth in 1898. These apocryphal stories do fit, but whether or not that makes them ‘true’ is another matter altogether.

My own research has revealed that an H. de C. Martelli appears several times in NSW shipping registers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Later, in 1908, the following paragraph appears in the personal column of Hobart’s *Mercury*:

Captain Martelli, who was yesterday appointed deputy harbourmaster at Hobart, is a stranger to the port. He is a native of Timaru, New Zealand, and served four years’ apprenticeship in sailing vessels belonging to the Shaw, Savill, and Albion Company, trading between London and New Zealand. After leaving that service in 1897, he joined the Eastern and Australian S.S. Company, trading between Australia, China, and Japan ...<sup>121</sup>

Captain Horatio de Courcy Martelli —otherwise known as Ted—was born in New Zealand a year before Falleni arrived as a two year old. Josephine’s middle name, as reported in her obituary, and the name of her only surviving child, is the same as one of Ted’s older sisters: Rita. I am tempted to make other connections. Why did Captain Martelli leave the Shaw, Savill and Albion company in 1897, the same year Josephine was conceived? I have no reason to connect Captain Martelli with Josephine’s father, beyond a few convenient coincidences and have to content myself with the idea that research into “Captain Martello” has led towards a slightly more refined, though inconclusive, pool of possibilities.

#### WAS FALLENI A “VIOLENT KILLER”, OR WAS ANNIE’S DEATH AN ACCIDENT?

All three of the authors discussed in this section agree that what happened on the banks of the Lane Cove River on October 1, 1917, will forever remain a mystery. Before confidently describing his version of events, Tedeschi explains, “there were only two people who knew exactly what happened next in the clearing at the Lane Cove River Park: Harry Crawford and his wife, Annie. Neither of them was in a position afterwards to give an account” (55). Falkiner similarly admits: “in the end, only Annie Birkett died, and whether Eugenia knowingly intended to kill her remains uncertain at best.”<sup>122</sup> And yet despite not being able to know, all three texts suggest Annie’s death was most likely an accident.

Tedeschi posits that it was in the Crown’s interest to suggest Annie was ignorant of Falleni’s assigned sex when he writes that “the main peril [the Crown prosecutor] feared was that some of the jurors might mistakenly think that the deceased wife must have ... been complicit-

120. “Curtain on Man-Woman,” *Truth*, July 3, 1938.

121. “Personal,” *Mercury*, December 9, 1908, 5, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

122. Falkiner, *Eugenia: a Man*, 250.

it in this unnatural, distasteful and illegal pantomime of marriage, and so acquit the accused out of a sense of distaste for the victim” (127). He does not go so far as to suggest Annie might have knowingly been in a queer relationship, but in establishing that Annie’s ignorance was “the motive Coyle [relied] on to explain the murder” (127), he makes available the possibility that her ignorance may have been constructed, or at the very least over-simplified, by the police. Tedeschi also suggests that Coyle would have known the main obstacle he faced was “that he was not in a position to be able to prove to the jury exactly how the deceased ... had come to die” (127–128). He writes that Coyle was “deliberately vague” when it came to “what actually happened between Harry and Annie in the park” (129), and implies Coyle would have been worried the jury might not be able to decide “beyond a reasonable doubt” that Annie was murdered (130). Tedeschi argues that the various sighting witnesses were “clearly irreconcilable”, that the Crown would have known this, and have been aware that “a skilful defence counsel could easily render these identification witnesses valueless” (131–132), making available the possibility that Falleni was not in the park with Annie, or at least not in the park on Friday, Sunday and Monday, as the sighting witnesses suggested.

Tedeschi explains that Coyle’s use of the words “something like a motive” when proposing Falleni’s alleged motive to the jury, indicates that he believed the motive was “somewhat deficient in explaining the subsequent murder” (133), and Tedeschi and Falkiner have both argued that Annie’s choice to continue to live with Crawford after she supposedly made the discovery of her sex in January 1917, weakens their argument. As Falkiner writes:

If such a betrayal did not provoke an immediate reaction, why should it provoke such a reaction eight months later? What threat was posed by Annie that had not been posed before? (80)

Falkiner answers her own question earlier in the book, when she lists a variety of plausible reasons why Annie might have stayed with Crawford in those intervening months:

Perhaps it was merely inertia, or the fear of being alone again, that stopped Annie Birkett from leaving Harry when she discovered his secret. Perhaps it was fear of scandal, which after all had partly motivated her to marry Harry, that led her to keep up a pretence of normality. Perhaps, having lost her savings, she saw Harry’s labourer’s wage as keeping her from a return to a life of drudgery as a household servant. Perhaps it was habit. Perhaps she loved him, despite all. Perhaps she intended to leave him, but never did. She made no initial move to have the marriage annulled, as Moran suggested she intended, but this may have been from ignorance of how to go about it.

Once his secret was discovered, Harry Crawford, for similarly unknowable reasons, did not attempt to leave her. (46)

A comment Lydia Parnell made at Falleni’s committal hearing, but that was not repeated at the trial, may help narrow Falkiner’s list of options. Lydia Parnell mentioned that Harry had said his wife was dissatisfied with him in 1917, “as he was out of employment”.<sup>123</sup> And yet at the trial, Harry Birkett mentioned that “during all that time that the accused was working at

123. “Mrs. Birkett’s Death,” *Evening News*, August 18, 1920.

Perdriau's she was supporting the house".<sup>124</sup> In Crawford's initial statement to police he mentioned "I went to work at Perdriau's Factory, where I remained until I was put off, owing to shortage caused during the great strike of 1917."<sup>125</sup> The Great Strike "officially" ended on September 10, 1917 (eighteen days before Annie's disappearance), when union leaders declared the strike to be over, however, railway workers did not begin to return to work for ten more days.<sup>126</sup> With Annie only taking on work when Clara Bone's maid was away, perhaps Crawford's sudden loss of employment gave Annie the impetus she needed to have the marriage annulled. Or perhaps Annie had no intention of having the marriage annulled, but Crawford's recent unemployment put pressure on the marriage and caused them to fight violently.

Crawford's recent loss of employment was not mentioned in Falleni's trial, possibly because it may have suggested the revelation of Crawford's sex was not the cause of tension between the couple. Crawford's loss of employment is not mentioned by Philpott, Falkiner, or Tedeschi. Instead, they focus on other issues that may have been a point of contention that lead to a violent fight. Tedeschi argues that Annie planned the picnic in order to propose that they have their marriage annulled, that Crawford did not take well to this proposition, and that during a physical tussle Annie fell and hit her head on a rock (57–58). Philpott has Annie tell Crawford that she intends to leave, and she does not want him to follow her. Crawford swigs from a whiskey bottle, and a fight follows, but it is obscured (89). All three writers build the case for Annie's accidental death by exploring the social tensions that might have led to Crawford behaving in a violent manner as a one-off occurrence, but unlike Tedeschi and Philpott, Falkiner includes two third-hand stories which claim Falleni had previously attempted or committed murder. According to Nancy Cracknell, "Gene Falleni" had threatened to kill Arthur Whitby: "She had already stabbed him with a knife, after an argument" (263). Falkiner also included the speculations of a Mr J. A. Knight, who believed that Falleni killed a man in New Zealand, "and possibly Mariana De Angelis in Double Bay as well, but also a black woman who worked in the same laundry in New South Head Road, whose disappearance the police had been unable to account for." Falkiner promptly discredits Knight's contributions by reminding her readers that Knight believed Falleni was a serial killer because "Eugenia's eyes were blue" (270).

Tedeschi has ignored any details that might compromise the case for Annie's accidental death. While Tedeschi chose to include the story of Falleni's rape, he chose *not* to include a significant detail from Josephine's statement: that Mrs DeAngelis "often" said Falleni had tried to smother her when she was an infant.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps Tedeschi thought that Falleni's attempted infanticide might portray her as a hard-wired murderer who planned to kill Josephine, Harry Birkett and Annie for calculated reasons, whereas Tedeschi is clear he wants readers to believe the attempts on Harry Birkett's life were pity-motivated and tangled up in Falleni's intentions to commit suicide—behaviour consistent with someone in shock after having accidentally killed his spouse (140). Tedeschi goes to lengths to argue against the version of events widely

124. Birkett in *Rex v. Falleni*, 12.

125. "Man-Woman's Daughter" *Evening News*, August 19, 1920.

126. "Go Back to Work. Strike Committee's Orders. Engineers Act Similarly. Important Decisions by Executives," *Evening News*, September 10 1917, 1, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>; "End of Struggle. Men Signing on at Eveleigh," *Evening News*, September 20 1917, 5, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

127. "Man-Woman's Daughter," *Evening News*, August 19, 1920.

published in the press—that the two attempts on Harry Birkett’s life were calculated—by suggesting Harry Birkett had “constructed some or all of the drama of this tale because of the deep guilt that he felt at his failure to report his mother as a missing person in 1917” (141). And yet the fact that Tedeschi does not even mention Falleni’s attempted infanticide of Josephine suggests he does not want his readers to form more negative opinions of Falleni’s character than would suit his argument. Despite its ‘allegedness’, the attempted infanticide of Josephine offers an important insight into Falleni’s daughter’s perception of her mother, and Tedeschi’s omission of this event oversimplifies the complex actions of a person in a desperate situation.

In her statement, Josephine avoids directly accusing her mother of attempting to smother her, and instead tells police that the story was “often told to her” by Granny DeAngelis. This is an interesting quirk in the statement, but any narrative extrapolation as to why Mrs DeAngelis was implicated in this fashion can only be speculated upon. In any case, surely an analysis of these possibilities would have made for a richer character study of Falleni, or at least a character study truer to sources than the one Tedeschi presents for his readers. For Tedeschi, Falleni is a victim of her circumstances, rather than an agent in dialogue with them, as well as subject to their influence.

#### WAS FALLENI ULTIMATELY PUNISHED FOR “MURDER” OR FOR “SEX FRAUD”?

As Tedeschi points out, in order “to avoid the rigours of the law” detectives Robson and Watkins were intentionally vague about whether or not Harry Crawford was under arrest when they first questioned him at the Empire Hotel. Tedeschi writes that “the law placed an obligation on a police officer who placed a suspect under arrest to bring them before a magistrate ‘without unreasonable delay’ and by the most reasonably direct route” (170). When Robson ‘asked’ Crawford to come with him to the police station, he issued the request as a statement of fact: “I have my doubts about you and I am going to take you to the Central Court or the Detective Office to make further investigations.”<sup>128</sup> Robson did not use the phrase ‘you are under arrest’, so that, should he later be accused of breaching the law for not immediately taking him to the police court and providing him with a lawyer, he could claim Crawford went to the station and gave his statement voluntarily (170).

According to Tedeschi, prior to this moment of ‘invitation’, Harry Birkett (in particular his statement to police on June 13, 1920) and Annie’s sister Lily Nugent had already given the police the information they needed to place Harry Crawford under arrest. Tedeschi presumes that they did not immediately do so in the hope that by subjecting him to a quick succession of visibly unnerving invasions of privacy—the medical examination, the confrontation with Harry Birkett, and the revelation of the dildo—a murder confession might be forced from Crawford, which “would make the police investigation much more straightforward and require far less laborious legwork.”<sup>129</sup>

128. Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 79.

129. According to Robson, after her medical examination ‘confirmed’ she was a woman, Falleni said “this is a terrible thing for me and the worry of my life”; *ibid.*, 81; See also Tedeschi, *Eugenia*, 84.

In spite of their various intimidation tactics, the detectives could not extract a murder confession from Crawford. They did, however, extract another kind of ‘confession’: that Falleni was “a woman and not a man”. Robson still did not charge the accused “with the present charge” until the afternoon, when Crawford’s gun and dildo—at trial euphemistically referred to as “the article”—were discovered.<sup>130</sup> While the possession of a dildo is not incriminating in itself, in lieu of a murder confession, Ruth Ford has argued that it was “the article” that was “constructed as evidence of Falleni’s guilt and [was later] used by the prosecution to emphasise Falleni’s deception, sexual perversion and guilt.” “The article” symbolised what the police needed in order for a magistrate to consent to a committal hearing: evidence of transgression and deception, which—upon having been discovered by Crawford’s wife—might prove something close to a motive for murder.<sup>131</sup>

By drawing attention to the following headline from *Truth*:

A STARTLING STORY  
WOMAN WHO MASQUERADED AND “MARRIED” OTHER WOMEN.  
Eugene Falleni and Her “Wives”  
Annie Birkett’s Death at Chatswood

Ruth Ford argues that the press covered the case “as if the charges against Falleni were masquerade and marriage”.<sup>132</sup> Perhaps, to the sensational press of the day, the police had coerced a confession from Falleni that was even more significant than a confession of murder.

Was “Eugene Falleni” ultimately placed under arrest for murder or sex fraud? Did this confusion mean detectives and the judiciary could see a perpetrator of sex fraud punished with the death sentence? If, as Ruth Ford has suggested, a man called Harry Crawford and not Eugene Falleni had been on trial for Annie’s death, it is highly likely the charge against him would have been domestic murder or manslaughter, as there was no conclusive evidence to suggest Annie had *not* died as the result of an accident.<sup>133</sup> In such an instance, it is not likely the death sentence would have been issued.

## SILENCE

No friend of Annie’s or member of Annie’s family reported her missing to the police until May, 1920. As Falkiner writes, “for two years and nine months young Harry Birkett was apparently too preoccupied with the business of survival to do much about his mother’s disappearance. He wrote to old neighbours to see if they had news of her, and eventually he tracked down his aunt” (242). Tedeschi is slightly more damning of Harry Birkett’s silence:

---

130. Robson in *Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, 81; 83.

131. Ford, “The Man-Woman Murderer,” 167.

132. *Ibid.*, 171.

133. *Ibid.*, 184.

Ultimately, it remains inexplicable that the only son of such a devoted and caring mother would meekly accept that she had suddenly left him, without saying goodbye or leaving any forwarding address. Whatever the reasons, Harry Jnr accepted that his mother had gone to live elsewhere and he either did not hold any suspicions or, if he did, he did not act on them. In fact, at the time nobody reported Annie as a missing person. (73–74)

The fact that no one reported Annie missing either suggests they thought it was plausible she had left after fight, or that they did not want to create a scandal. Had Harry genuinely believed his mother had run away with another man (scandalous behaviour for suburban Sydney in 1917), and had he, a teenager, also been fighting with his mother in the lead up to her disappearance, he may have believed she had cut him and her old life off altogether. Lily Nugent also made no effort to contact her sister after she found out about Crawford's sex in January. Neither did she try to contact her nephew. Perhaps her last communication with Annie had not ended well. Perhaps she had urged Annie to leave her marriage and have it annulled, or perhaps she had told Annie that she had made her bed, so she should lie in it and not bring any scandal into the family. However their communication in January ended, it did not leave Lily concerned enough to contact her sister again.

Tedeschi states as fact (though it is only speculation) that “it was in Frank Bombelli's home in about April 1920 that Harry Jnr was told something so extraordinary that he was finally prompted to enquire into what had happened to his mother. Frank Bombelli told him that Harry Crawford was really a woman called ‘Nina’ dressed as a man, and that Marcelina Bombelli knew Nina's Italian family in New Zealand” (81). There is, however, another possibility: Harry Birkett *may* have known about Crawford's sex for some time, and possibly did not approach the police for fear the news of his mother's sexual inclinations would embarrass him and his family. Perhaps it took Harry Birkett two and a half years to work out how to tell the police, without slandering his mother's name. Perhaps this is why, in his original deposition to police, he makes no mention of Crawford being a woman (though by this stage he would have known) and no mention of Josephine, which, under questioning, may have forced him to admit he knew about Crawford's sex. It is curious that Josephine is not mentioned in anyone's testimony in court.

And there are other silences, other omissions. As Ruth Ford has observed:

The case ... highlights issues about the significance of silence, the pervasive denial of cross-gender/lesbian sexual practices and the displacement of same-sex desire. Sexual details—such as the dildo—were not mentioned within the press. Such sustained censorship suggests the investment in silence by social and political powers, and the construction of that which is ‘unspeakable’ ... The refusal to conceive the possibility that Falleni's wives may have known him to be a woman and desired her as a man-woman was ‘not a failure to know, but a refusal to know.’<sup>134</sup>

For Falkiner, the court transcript was notable for its absences: “A kaleidoscope of images plucked from the mundane suburban lives of Eugenia's neighbours and acquaintances, they

134. *Ibid.*, 187.

had revealed as much by what was not in them as by what was. Eugenia had said little for herself” (153). It is silence that has aroused the curiosity of Tedeschi, and Philpott, and other artists and writers inspired to speculate on *why* absences in the record might exist, and what they tell us about the fears and fascinations of Sydneysiders—both in 1917 and today.

### WAS FALLENI A TRANSGENDER MAN?

According to Ruth Ford, prior to the publication of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psycopathia Sexualis* (1886) and Havelock Ellis’s *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897), women who passed as men were “often incorporated into existing national mythology and represented as bold, adventurous Australian girls or as heroines trying to survive in a harsh, man’s world.”<sup>135</sup> In *Parting with My Sex* Lucy Chesser argues that Falleni’s case marked a shift from passing men being written about as “adventurous” to “deviant”. Chesser compares Falleni’s treatment to that of Marion/Bill Edwards—a passing man tried in 1906 for burglary who became a celebrity after her female sex was ‘revealed’. Unlike Falleni, Edwards capitalised on the publicity and published a memoir in which she described having “hot sex” with women. Chesser argues that by the time Falleni’s story became available to the press in 1920, “police, lawyers, the judiciary, and the press had been influenced, if not directly by scientific ideas, then at least indirectly by a concurrent stigmatisation of gender-crossings linked to sexuality.”<sup>136</sup> Gender-crossing had become more widely recognised as a pathological condition, clearly demarcated from ‘normal’ behaviour.

Falleni’s diagnosis as a ‘sexual invert’ was never decided upon during her trial, though the idea was introduced by the defence. Ford argues that it was not in the interest of the Crown to classify Falleni as a ‘sexual invert’, as “to do so would have detracted from their case, which emphasised Falleni’s deceptive nature—her fraud and lies—and undermined the integrity of Falleni’s statements and actions ... for if, as Havelock Ellis stated it, ‘every criminal act proceeds from a person who is ... in a more or less abnormal condition’, then ‘the notion of punishment loses much of its foundation. We cannot punish a monstrosity for acting according to monstrous nature.’” According to Ford, Falleni’s defence counsel tried to challenge the Crown by suggesting that “Falleni’s cross-dressing and marriage were due to innate sexual inversion, not ‘sex-fraud’.”<sup>137</sup> However, the defence attempted to prove this by arguing Falleni had “the masculine angle of the arms” and did not call any of their own medical experts to support their point.<sup>138</sup> McDonell’s cross-examination of Dr Palmer, the government medical officer called for the Crown, revealed that the popular understanding of sexual inversion (or at least McDonell’s understanding of it) conflated hermaphroditism and variations in physical typology with a same-sex sexual impulse. That the judge interrupted McDonell to ask if he was making an insanity plea during this cross-examination only proves that uncertainty over whether ‘sexual

135. *Ibid.*, 163.

136. Lucy Chesser, *Parting with My Sex* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008), 316, 253, 316.

137. Ford, “‘The Man-Woman Murderer,’” 165, 168.

138. “‘Man-Woman’ on Trial. Many Jurors Challenged. Interesting Evidence Outlined by Prosecutor. Medical Testimony Concerning Sexual Inversion,” *Truth*, October 10, 1920, 10, accessed via <http://trove.nla.gov.au>.

inversion' was a sexuality-type, a sex-type, a physiological type, or a diagnosis of mental illness was a confusion experienced not only by the general, but also the educated, public.

Since Falleni's arrest various attempts have been made to categorise Falleni's gender-crossing. Occasionally, these attempts have used medical or scientific terminology to give weight to their chosen taxonomies. In 1938 *Smith's* published an article written by the magazine's 'medical writer' entitled 'Women Who Marry Women—What Misplaced Atoms Can Do'. The article claimed that "science" had a "chemical clue" to explain the "problem" of sexual inversion: "Because of a chemical error in the period immediately preceding her birth, such a woman starts life with the body of a woman, but the mentality of a man." The article explained that baby girls have "one less atom of carbon, and five less of hydrogen" than boys, but that if a baby girl develops the male chemical in utero, "a Falleni ... type of being will be born." The article repeatedly insists that "this is not guesswork" and that "this is fact, not theory."<sup>139</sup> One year later Dr Moran wrote that Falleni was a "homosexualist" and suggested her "disorder" was congenital when he wrote that: "She was condemned even from her birth and her abnormality derived from the very nature of her being. The temperamental outbursts, the vulgar debauches, the filthy speech, were but minor manifestations of her interior disorder."<sup>140</sup>

Writing over seventy years later, Tedeschi claims that Falleni had "gender dysmorphia". Tedeschi makes this position clear in the first sentence of his introduction when he writes that Falleni "boldly strode out in adulthood in an attempt to establish what she saw as her true self as a man" (xiii), and relies most heavily on his generalised transgender narrative when speculating on how Falleni might have felt and behaved at undocumented moments in her life. Tedeschi reports that "her female bodily attributes were like having an unwanted, additional limb attached to her body that she overwhelmingly felt did not belong to her" (19), and that when faced with the prospect of suckling Josephine Falleni "was overcome by feelings of revulsion" (21). Occasionally Tedeschi's turns-of-phrase belie assumptions about gender that directly contradict the transgender narrative he outwardly appears to advocate. When recalling her time working in a drainpipe factory in Wellington, Tedeschi writes, "after a week or so, her true identity was exposed" (16), implying that her male identity was not her 'authentic' or 'true' self, and at another point Tedeschi attributes a lesbian fantasy to Crawford: "he would daydream that a beautiful woman would come up to him and tell him that she knew his secret but that it did not matter ... and they would undress each other and do things together without any embarrassment, shame or anxiety" (28). Ultimately, despite his diagnosis of "gender dysmorphia", Tedeschi's position on Falleni's transgenderism is confused.

Alyson Campbell, director of Lachlan Philpott's play, argues that a diagnosis of gender dysmorphia removes the possibility of a homosexual tendency from Falleni/Crawford and decidedly normalises his relationship with Annie, resisting the idea "that women might want to live together in a loving and sexual relationship".<sup>141</sup> Campbell has expressed her own initial intention to impose a lesbian subjectivity on Falleni's story, however conceded that neither lesbian or trans identities were "available to a person such as Falleni, navigating a way

139. "Women Who Marry Women—What Misplaced Atoms Can Do," *Smith's Weekly*, June 25, 1938.

140. Moran, *Viewless Winds*, 249.

141. Campbell, introduction to Philpott, *The Trouble with Harry*, 9.



through the undocumented, secret world of being a female husband.” Campbell concludes that “these issues of sexuality and gender identity remain deeply hidden, raising all sorts of ethical questions for a playwright attempting to make a work about this historical figure.”<sup>142</sup>

Falkiner is likewise careful not to settle on a diagnosis for Falleni in an era of ever-changing definitions. When Falkiner writes that “the current literature of female-to-male transsexualism suggest[s] that in many cases when it occurs there is a dominant father,” she is clear to point out that this tendency is only suggested in *current* literature. There is no one, fixed pronouncement on transgender preconditions. In the acknowledgements at the end of her book, she writes: “Since [my] book was first published, there has been lively, even contentious, discussion as to where to place Eugenia along the transgender spectrum, sometimes framing her story in theory that did not exist at the time of my original research. What Eugenia might have thought about this, nobody knows.” (280)

What Falleni *said* about her tendency to “wear male attire”, however, we do know. When called before the Masterton Court as “Lena Salette”, the Wanganui Herald reported that “She said ... that she had been put up to impersonating a man.” Later, after her arrest in 1920, Falleni twice mentioned that she “wore male attire” for economic reasons. On July 11, 1920, *Truth* reported that:

she said, according to the detectives, that her reason for assuming the personality of a man was that she thought it better to give up life as a woman, because they worked for long hours for a small wage. She was quite competent to do the work of an hotel useful and other manual labor, and did it, working fewer hours for better money than she would have received had she “remained” a woman.<sup>143</sup>

In her interview with J. D. Corbett, Falleni also claimed that “she decided to adopt male attire” after she had been excluded from Mrs D’Angeli’s will “because she thought she could do more work as a man than as a woman.”<sup>144</sup> This “economic reasons only” rationale of Falleni’s loses credibility when we consider that she married two women and owned a dildo—evidence that she had engaged in sexual relationships with women. In an age which did not have a language for what is now considered transgender experience, beyond the labels ‘sex invert’, ‘psychical hermaphrodite’, ‘homosexualist’ or ‘sex pervert’, it is not surprising Falleni avoided citing gendered or sexual reasons for adopting male attire, especially in an interview which was supposed to build pity and empathy in the public, and secure her release.

There is another possibility, which Falkiner tactfully raises as a question: it is possible that, “in the final reckoning, what Eugenia believed about herself might also prove fictitious.” (79) Perhaps Falleni preferred not to admit certain things to herself, for fear she would find them too distasteful to live with.

---

142. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

143. “A Startling Story,” *Truth*, July 11 1920, 9.

144. Corbett, “Man-Woman Eugene Fallini Makes Appeal for Freedom”, 1.

## CONCLUSION

### NEGOTIATING UNCERTAINTY IN THE WRITING OF *HALF-WILD*

*Half-Wild* is a novel in five parts written through and around the sources pertaining to the lives of Eugenia Falleni. When so much of the factual basis underpinning Falleni's story is uncertain, a range of narrative scenarios opens up. My challenge has been to turn these occasionally contradictory possible scenarios into a narrative, without collapsing them down into yet another singular, factually problematic, account of 'what happened' to Falleni. Despite the source-based research underpinning *Half-Wild*, I have chosen to write within Friend's understanding of fiction-as-a-genre in order to explore more thoroughly the emotional colour palette, multi-vocality, and myths that surround the facts of Falleni's story. To help me negotiate the paradoxes inherent to writing fiction about true identities, I have borrowed features from Strehle's genre of actualist fiction.

Like Falkiner, I do not claim to speak on behalf of Falleni, and although I have, at times, written in the first person from Falleni's point of view, I have tried to ensure that these voices are lyrical, implausible, and implicitly metafictional, in that they point to their own status as imaginings, versions and performances without compromising the immersive nature of their fiction-worlds.

In order to accommodate contradictory possibilities, I have refracted Falleni's story by dividing the novel into five parts. In each part, a different persona of Falleni's is presented as the point of focus. By using this structure, I aim not to "foreground a single voice and vantage point but rather to set plural voices in motion and conflict," challenging the idea that Falleni's 'true' self was one self in particular.<sup>1</sup> Part one is narrated in the first person, from the point of view of Tally Ho, Falleni's moniker (according to her friend Nellie Matthews) as a child and adolescent.<sup>2</sup> This part, driven by the hopeful momentum of youth, follows a linear, straightforward storyline. Tally Ho is frustrated by the limited patterns the lives around her trace, and prefers to imagine that the future, and the world outside Wellington, is rich with unexplored possibilities. Part two focuses on Harry and Jack Crawford in Sydney and is narrated in the

1. Strehle, *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*, 224.

2. Falkiner, *Eugenia: a Man*, 210.

third person, from the multiple points of view of neighbours, friends, a landlord, and Crawford's step-son. In this part Crawford is a performance, but a performance in an ensemble of other performers who are less aware of the stage they tread and the costumes that adorn them. Edith Hoyes as she trims her rose bush, and Jane Wigg as she performs her morning tea ceremony for Detective Watkins, are as much (if not more) concerned with how their gestures come across to others, as they are with the gestures of those they converse with. They are not only performing their genders, but they are also performing their own normalcy, and in so doing define the parameters of heteronormativity in 1917 Sydney. Set amongst the heightened mediocrity of these suburban lives, Crawford is more awkward, but also more subdued. He does not quite fit, but he is not loud enough to be noticed as a fraud.

Part three centres on Nina Falleni, an Italian woman who intermittently works at a laundry in Double Bay, and has a daughter called Josephine. This part is largely told from the perspective of Josephine Falleni, but also Mrs DeAngelis and Marcelina Bombelli, two Italian migrants who knew Falleni as Nina. There is a nostalgic tug to this part, a yearning for what might have been. Josephine yearns for the man who might have been her father, while Nina longs to return to Wellington. Part four is told from the broader perspective of Sydney, in particular the police and lawyers involved in Falleni's case, as well as the newspaper reporters and women who watched Falleni's trial from the gallery. This part slips in and out of a collective first person position—the voice of 'Sydney'—but the position never sits easily, as Sydney is not sure "who we are in the first place". Here, the idea of a singular identity is troubled by shifting the frame from the individual 'self', to a collective, cultural identity. This voice ultimately fractures when the narration of the trial is taken over by a collage of newspaper reports. Part five is told in the first person again, this time from the perspective of Jean Ford, the persona adopted by Falleni as she lies in a coma directly after being hit by a car on Oxford Street, Paddington. Time in this section is circular, and follows the narrative logic of a lucid dream. Jean remembers her past as she told it to various journalists and doctors who visited her in prison, and the reader is left to wonder if she is remembering what happened, or simply what she *said* happened.

Each part is informed by a selection of sources, although the sources that inform different parts might contradict each other. For example, while part two relies primarily on the transcript of Falleni's trial for its foundation, part five refers to a similar time period (through analepsis), but uses Falleni's *Smith's Weekly* interview as its foundation, in which Falleni protested her innocence, and provided her own version of what took place over the long weekend of October 1917. Names also gradually alter. In Part Three Josephine's foster grandmother is Mrs DeAngelis, as she appears in Josephine's statement to police. In part five the same woman is referred to as Mrs D'Angeli, as she is named in Falleni's *Smith's Weekly* interview. No one part is intended to be presented as "more accurate" or even "more probable" than the others, only more appropriate to the perspectives they're told from. In this way, *Half-Wild* is a fictional biography of the *sources* pertaining to Falleni, more than it is a fictional biography of Falleni herself.

The reader may question whether the parts present aspects of the same over-arching fiction-world, or five alternative fiction-worlds, placed side-by-side. This is a question I have

not resolved, and do not intend to resolve. For me, the contradictions, mysteries and factual aberrations that typify the various 'true' accounts of Falleni's story are intrinsic to how the person they are based on lived her lives. To resolve them would be to ignore what is most provocative and alluring about Falleni's story: how it resonates with the common experience of being multiple, mutable, and socially determined, and how difficult it can be to reconcile our many selves.

---

## WORKS CITED

- American Institute of Physics and David Cassidy. "Quantum Mechanics 1925–1927: The Uncertainty Relations." Accessed March 4, 2016. <https://www.aip.org/history/heisenberg/p08a.htm>.
- Birkett, Harry. *Papers and Depositions, Supreme Court Sydney and on Circuit*. Criminal Investigation Branch, no. NRS 880 [9/7250] (June 13 1920).
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2007.
- Byatt, A. S. *On Histories and Stories*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Chesser, Lucy. *Parting with My Sex: Cross-Dressing, Inversion and Sexuality in Australian Cultural Life*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008.
- Currie, Mark. *Metafiction*. London and New York: Longman, 1995.
- D'Agata, John. *The Next American Essay*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2003.
- Einstein, Albert. *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Falkiner, Suzanne. *Eugenia: a Man*. Sydney: Xoum Publishing, 2014.
- Ford, Ruth. "'The Man-Woman Murderer': Sex Fraud, Sexual Inversion and the Unmentionable 'Article' in 1920s Australia." *Gender and History* 12.1 (2000): 158–196.

- Friend, Stacie. "Fiction as a Genre." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 112.2 (2012): 179-209. Accessed March 4, 2016, [http://www.academia.edu/1430756/Fiction\\_as\\_a\\_Genre](http://www.academia.edu/1430756/Fiction_as_a_Genre).
- Furbank, P. N. "Falling for Desmoulins." *London Review of Books* 14.16 (1992). Accessed 4 March 2016, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v14/n16/pn-furbank/falling-for-desmoulins>.
- Gass, William H. *Fiction and the Figures of Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.
- Heisenberg, Werner. *Physics and Philosophy*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.
- Hume, Katherine. "Mason & Dixon." In *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Inger H. Dalsgaard, Luc Herman, and Brian McHale. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies of Realism*. London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2015.
- Johnson, Julie M. "The Theory of Relativity in Modern Literature: An Overview and *The Sound and the Fury*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 10.2 (1983): 217-230.
- Jones, Colin. "A Place of Greater Safety." Accessed March 4, 2016, <http://h-france.net/fffh/classics/hilary-mantel-a-place-of-greater-safety/>.
- Kelly, Vince. *Rugged Angel: The Amazing Career of Policewoman Lillian Armfield*. Sydney, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1995.
- "Thomas Pynchon on Plagiarism." Letters of Note. Accessed March 4, 2016, <http://www.letter-sofnote.com/2010/08/thomas-pynchon-on-plagiarism.html>.
- Mantel, Hilary. *A Place of Greater Safety*. London: Harper Collins, 2010.
- Midgley, Mary. *Science and Poetry*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2007.
- Moran, Herbert Michael. *Viewless Winds: Being the Recollections and Digressions of an Australian Surgeon*. London: P. Davies, 1939.
- New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs. "Death Certificate for Federigo Ferruccio Falleni." Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1880/3173.
- . "Birth Certificate of Ida Marguerita Falleni." Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1882/2334.

- 
- . “Birth Certificate for Marie Rose Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1883/10995.
- . “Birth Certificate for Emelia Maria Ginlia Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1885/6261.
- . “Birth Certificate for Giuseppe Ilio Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1886/15598.
- . “Birth Certificate for Gimi Alfredo Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1889/12839.
- . “Birth Certificate for Louis Hermandos Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1892/13636.
- . “Death Certificate for Alberto Gorgeo.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1894/2935.
- . “Birth Certificate for Alberto Georgio Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1894/17801.
- . “Marriage Certificate for Ugenia Falleni and Brasseli Innocente.” Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1894/ 2338.
- . “Birth Certificate for Anita Mary Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1895/13338.
- . “Birth Certificate for Lily Falleni.” Births, Deaths and Marriages Office, 1897/1709.
- Nicolson, Marjorie Hope. *Science and Imagination*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Great Seal Books, 1956.
- NSW Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages. “Marriage Certificate for Elizabeth King Alison and Harry Leo Crawford.” 8873/1919.
- . “Marriage Certificate for Arthur Whitby and Josephine Falleni.” 13226/1920.
- . “Birth Certificate for Josephine Falleni.” 36114/1898.
- . “Marriage Certificate for Annie Birkett and Harry Leo Crawford.” 867/1913.
- . “Death Certificate for Harry Birkett.” 2274/1906.
- . “Death Certificate for Josephine De Angliss.” 16305/1914.

- 
- Philpott, Lachlan. *The Trouble with Harry*. London: Oberon Books, 2014.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Mason & Dixon*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1997.
- Rex v. Eugene Falleni*, NRS 2713 [6/1077] State Records NSW (1920).
- Savvas, Theo J. "Pynchon Plays Dice: *Mason & Dixon* and Quantum History." *Literature & History* Vol. 20, no. 2 (2011): 16.
- Smith, Shawn. *Pynchon and History: Metahistorical Rhetoric and Postmodern Narrative Form in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*. Routledge, 2005.
- Staiger, Jeffrey. 'James Wood's Case against "Hysterical Realism" and Thomas Pynchon.' *The Antioch Review* 66.4 (2008): 634–654.
- State Records NSW. "Photo Description Book." Photo #499. Long Bay: State Reformatory for Women, 1920.
- Strehle, Susan. *Fiction in the Quantum Universe*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996. 1992.
- Tedeschi, Mark. *Eugenia*. Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2012.
- Vardi, Liana. "What is FFFH?" Accessed March 4, 2016, <http://h-france.net/fffh/what-is-fffh/>.
- Wall Hinds, Elizabeth Jane. "Introduction: The Times of *Mason & Dixon*." *The Multiple Worlds of Pynchon's Mason & Dixon*, ed. Elizabeth Jane Wall Hinds. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005.
- Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993).
- Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984.
- Wellington Suburbs Electoral Roll. Wellington, N.Z. 1896–97. Accessed via <http://www.ancestry.com>.
- Wood, James. "Human, All Too Inhuman." Accessed March 4, 2016. <https://newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-all-too-inhuman>.



**HALF-WILD**

“She was just a half-wild creature who felt herself apart and different.”  
— Dr Herbert M. Moran, 1939

“I was what other people made me.”  
— Eugenia Falleni, 1930

**TALLY HO**

**OR WHO SHE'D LIKE TO BE**

# DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

## WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND

**Isola Falleni:** Tailoress, native of Ardenza, Italy. Wife of Luigi. Migrated to New Zealand, 1877.

**Luigi Falleni:** Fisherman, native of Ardenza, Italy. Husband of Isola.

**Eugenia Falleni:** Firstborn child and daughter of Isola and Luigi Falleni, born in Ardenza, 1875. Also known as Tally Ho, Nina.

**Ida, Rosie and Emily Falleni:** Sisters of Eugenia.

**William Falleni:** Brother of Eugenia.<sup>1</sup>

**Nonna (Eugenia) Buti:** Isola's mother.

**Nonno Buti:** Isola's step-father, and Eugenia (the elder)'s second husband.

\* **Sister Katherine:** Nun and teacher at the Sacred Heart School.

\* **Father Kelly:** Priest at St Mary's Cathedral and headmaster of the Sacred Heart School.

**Mr Lillington:** Headmaster at Newtown School.

\* **Amelia Grey, Fuckit, Buckit:** Friends of Tally Ho.

**Horatio de Courcy Martelli:** Born in Timaru, New Zealand. Later became Captain and Harbourmaster at Hobart, Tasmania.<sup>2</sup>

**Harry Crawford:** A stevedore.<sup>3</sup>

**William George Raines:** A stevedore.

\* **Mrs Shepherd:** A lady of money and means.

\* **Mrs Pryce:** Housekeeper to Mrs Shepherd.

**Mr Innocente:** An 'image-maker', possible hotelier, possibly from Auckland.

**Captain Gunnion:** Captain in charge of the Pauline Home for girls.

\* **Sergeant Deirdre:** Assistant to Captain Gunnion.

**All names marked with \* are inventions.**

1. Historically, William was born much later, though Eugenia's first surviving brother, Giuseppe Ilio, was born when Eugenia was 11.

2. Whether Martelli spent any time in Wellington as a child is unknown; his life as 'Horse' is an invention.

3. A stevedore named Harry Crawford was killed by a man named Raines while protecting Raine's wife in a drunken fight shortly before Eugenia left for New Zealand. Their time as butcher boys is an invention.

---

## WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND, 1885

Mamma was always having babies. Sometimes I imagined they grew out her fingertips when she stood for too long in the sun, but they didn't. They crawled into her vagina when she sat on the toilet seat after Papà used it. That was why you always had to stand on the toilet seat and squat. Never sit.

And Mamma was a tailoress and a very hard worker. She worked every day of the week, and also cooked for us and cleaned the house and fixed our clothes except for when I did that, which was as often as she could make me. I tried not to be home too much in case she made me stitch flowers onto one of Ida's bonnets again. Mamma said Ida couldn't stitch flowers onto her own bonnet because she was three and if you tried to make her she would put the needle in her eye or in your eye or try to eat it. I didn't know why bonnets needed flowers. If I had to stitch a horse costume, I would have done it. Or if I had to stitch something useful like trousers. But I didn't know why bonnets needed flowers, so I wouldn't do it.

When I came home after being outside for too long, Mamma would look at me as if she was experiencing great sorrow. When she stood up she held her back and sucked in through her teeth, as if the sorrow might leak out her back and pour all over the floor. Mamma always wore black, to accentuate the sorrow. She said she was in mourning for her lost babies, but she had more alive than she had dead, so you'd think that would make her want to wear more colour.

So far she had:

Me who was ten

Lisa who was nine but in Italy and didn't want to come and live with us

Federigo who would be five but was dead

Ida who was three

Rosie who was one

and Emily who was not anything yet.

Then there were others who died before they came out. There was no saying how many she'd have before she stopped.

I saw my last three sisters come out of Mamma and she was screaming and sweating and throwing her head around each time. Those three times were the only times I saw her hair out and all over the pillow, and she was yelling at me, *Ho troppo caldo! Tagliani i capelli, cazzo!* but Papà yelled, *Non brontolare!* from the other room. Each time Papà rushed in, asking, *È un maschio?* And each time Mamma said, *No, Luigi, hai una figlia.*

One of the times she gripped my arm so hard it bled where her nails went into the skin. I still have scars from it. They look like four empty cribs in a row.

*Right, you. It's morning. Up.*

It was still dark outside but Papà said it was morning, so it was morning.

*Why aren't you fishing?* I asked.

*The sea is too high. Why aren't you helping your mother?*

When there were high seas out on the harbour there were high seas inside Papà too. He'd walk through the house with heavy feet, sometimes carrying buckets of water and a mop which he'd drop in front of me without saying a word. Then his eyes would be a dark blue and you didn't say anything or else you got smacked. He never cared if I was out playing when he was fishing, but when there was no fishing he watched me closely, as if I was an insect he'd caught under a jar, and the jar made everything the insect did really big, but also kind of crooked.

*If you're going to live under this roof you have to help around the house,* said Papà, and he left the room but made sure the door was open so he could keep track of my getting-up progress with his ears.

Sometimes helping Mamma wasn't so bad. When we had to bottle passata at the end of summer my job was to put the teaspoon of salt into each bottle, but sometimes I got to fill the bottles with the red sauce. That was the best job, especially if you imagined you were a vampire and the red was actually blood from humans that you planned to drink over the winter when humans were harder to come by.

It was winter now and there was no passata to bottle, or bottles of blood to drink. There was only sewing in the dark, then school—long, restless hours of chalk screech and out-of-bounds daylight.

When I was fully dressed I lay in bed with all my clothes on and tried to be invisible. *Maybe today I will not have to go to school,* I thought. *Maybe today I will fix fishing nets with Papà instead.*

It was hard to tell how long it was before I could hear Papà's feet in the hallway. The steps were slow and even but loud too, which meant he was trying to be terrifying.

*Cosa. Ti. Ho. Detto?*

The walls shook with his voice. Mice turned around in their nests, and in somewhere like Christchurch an earthquake shook the leaves off all the trees. I threw back the covers to show him I was fully dressed.

*I did it all under the covers!*

He wasn't impressed.

When I eventually came out to help the sun had already crawled into the sky and surprise surprise Mamma said she wanted me to stitch flowers onto one of Ida's bonnets. I opened my mouth to complain, but then Mamma rushed towards a chamber pot and filled it with vomit.

*Fine, I said, I'll do it.*

*No Nina, it's the new baby, Mamma said.*

She looked pale and strained, and so, so tired.

*I don't want to have babies when I grow up, I said.*

Her face went still like the refrigerated pigs I once saw in the bond store at Queen's Wharf.

*Well what are you going to do? Mamma said. Be a nun?*

*No, I said. I am going to be a fisherman, or a driver down the West Coast called Tally Ho, or a butcher boy like Harry.*

She laughed. She said I was funny. Then she said I'd better get my Tally Ho to school or she'd butcher me herself.

My teacher at the Sacred Heart School was a nun. Her name was Sister Katherine. She always had her head in a book about distant lands, so when she walked through the school she was really walking through the plains of Africa, or moving through a fish market in the Orient. You always had to say her name twice. First to bring her back to earth, and then to bring her over to you. It went like this:

*Sister Katherine?*

*Hmmm?*

*Sister Katherine?*

*Oh! And she would jump and clutch her chest. Yes dear, what is it?*

Then she would look at you with her eyes all misted over, as if someone was having a hot bath inside her head.

Sometimes she read to us from one of her books, but only when Father Kelly wasn't around. On this particular morning she read out the first bit of Frankenstein but just as it was getting good she stopped and made different people read different bits. I was scared she might ask me to read so I sat close behind a fat girl's back, but Sister Katherine saw and asked me to read first.

I was sweating and my eyes were doing that thing where they jump between lines. Sister Katherine was staring at me, saying, *Go on. Go. On*, between long pauses while everyone waited for me to start. Even the trees outside were waiting. The cicadas started chanting *read read read* faster and faster until someone threw a piece of chalk at my head and shouted, *You can't read!* Everyone laughed and the cicadas whirred and the trees bent down and brushed against the window, *ho ho ho*. Sister Katherine wasn't laughing, though. She had her finger pointing at me like a gun. *Out!* she shrieked. *Outside until I work out what to do with you!*

While I waited for Sister Katherine to calm down, I did some experiments in the playground. I found a lizard and I also found a cicada that was the same thickness as the lizard. I pulled the head off the lizard and pulled the head off the cicada and then swapped them

around, mainly so the lizard could see what it would be like to fly. I held the head in place with some pins I stole from Mamma's sewing box and left the cicard and lizada behind a bush.

I knew Sister Katherine was behind me because all the insects in the playground were holding their breaths. Two cold fingers clamped my ear. I smelt talcum powder and old books and suddenly I was hauled onto my feet. Her flared nostrils were two trumpets, sounding the start of a hunt. *I will make an example of you*, she said, and dragged me to see Father Kelly.

*Show this child what happens to insolent children*, she said, but Father Kelly told her to leave and shut the door. Then Father Kelly came up to where I was standing, squatted down and looked me in the eye.

*You know, I've seen lots of insolent children in my time*, he said. *And there is a difference between an insolent child and a child who was not meant for the schoolroom. I do not think you can be taught. You are one for riding horses and running about getting scabby knees, aren't you?*

And I said *Yes* because it seemed like that's what I was supposed to say.

*But let me tell you this*, he said. *You might find school difficult now, but it will only get harder for you if you cannot read and write. Particularly for a ...* and then he talked a lot more. Out the window I could see the lizada hovering four feet off the ground. It wasn't even properly healed from its operation and already the lizada was learning how to fly.

Father Kelly held my chin and turned my face up so I had to look at him, and said, *Do you have a problem with your eyes, is that it?*

Up close I could see he had little red wriggly lines all over his cheeks and nose. That's why his face looked pink from a distance but up close it was lots of different colours—there was brown and some white splotches as well, and his moustache was yellow and white like the tail of a palomino horse.

*You have to let me know, child. We might be able to help you, but you have to talk to me.*

When I didn't say anything he breathed in very deeply and said, *Well then, if you won't let yourself be helped, good luck to you. You better go back to the classroom holding your backside, or Sister Katherine will think I have gone soft.*

At first I walked slowly in the direction of the classroom and then I looked over my shoulder and bolted towards the school gates. I cleared the fence in one leap and ran all the way up Adelaide Road and only stopped when I reached a high grassy hill. All I could do was grip my knees and pant, but it felt good to have that stale school air squeezed out of my lungs so nothing but life could flood back in.

When I looked up I saw that I had made it all the way to the hill behind the public school in Newtown. I could hear groaning coming from behind a tree and my first thought was that it might be a wild pig, and my second thought was that it might be a man and a woman kissing, but then I saw it was a girl about my age, and smelled the vomit that was all over her smock. Her smock used to be white, but now she looked like a cake that had been dropped on the road in the rain.

*Why did you vomit?* I asked her, and she said, *Because I ate too many cakes.*



*Why did you eat too many cakes?* I asked, and she told me she got bored in arithmetic so she walked out and bought all the Wellington cakes the baker had in his shop and charged it to the head teacher. Then she sat up here and ate every single one because she couldn't think of anything better to do.

*Oh*, I said. *I hate cakes.*

She burped a bit of vomit into her mouth and tried to cover it with her hand, and then we both looked down into the playground of Newtown School.

Compared to the Sacred Heart, Newtown School was a paradise. It sat in the middle of a dusty block as big as a desert except for when it rained. Then it sat in the middle of a swamp full of diseases and everyone got to go on holidays. Because of all the rain in Wellington, they got to go on holidays a lot. They also had a holiday when the HMS Nelson was in port and when New Zealand played Australia in the cricket and whenever the head teacher Mr Lillington needed to go to the bank. Even from up on the hill we could hear two girls say *Fuckit bumhole bugger shit* to a teacher in the playground. He didn't say anything back, he stood in the mud as if he had been struck by lightning and then the girls ran behind the building so they could throw scraps of rusted metal at him. Then he un-struck himself and kept walking around the playground with his hands behind his back as if he was thinking through a very hard bit of long division.

*Is that your school?* I asked the girl, and she said *Yes*.

*Do you like it?* I asked, and she said *Not really, no*, then pulled some grass out of the ground.

*What's your favourite colour?* I asked her.

*Grey, probably*, she said, which was a pretty good answer for a girl.

*What's your name?* I asked.

*Amelia Grey*, she said. *What's yours?*

*Tally Ho*, I said, and it felt like the beginning of something, when I said it out loud like that.

I didn't need to go to school anyway because I was going to be a butcher boy like Harry Crawford. All the butchers had boys who did deliveries for them and one of the best things was to watch them race through the streets. They'd hold the meat in one hand and whip their horse with the other, churning the street into a dust storm with their frenzied horses in the middle. It was like Arabia. And if the water cart had been through the street, patting the dirt down with the hose, that was even better. Everyone got splattered in mud, but no one cared. Shopkeepers would come out of their shops and stand on the side of the road to cheer them on. And if you got more than two butcher boys you'd get a real race with bets going and everything. Old ladies flew off to either side of the road. Young ladies held their hats as if a bible plague had come just to destroy all the hats. The butchers always pretended with the cops that they'd never asked their boys to ride like that through the streets, but if their boy won they couldn't wipe the smile off their face for the rest of the day and you'd get more change back for a ham hock than you expected.

Harry had won the race more than once but he never bragged about it, and he never said he won the race more than he had. Harry didn't need to brag or lie, because Harry knew that what he was and what he did was enough. He didn't need to be anything more.

On my first day of freedom I made as if I was going to school, but once I reached Adelaide Road I sunk back from the other Sacred Heart kids and went to Nonna and Nonno Buti's house instead. Nonno Buti was there playing chess with himself.

I said, *Nonno, why are you playing chess with no one?* And he said, *I AM NOT PLAYING CHESS WITH NO ONE, I AM PLAYING CHESS WITH MYSELF.*

Nonno Buti always yelled like that because he lost his hearing standing too close to explosions fighting in the Italian wars when he was younger.

Nonno Buti said that when he was in solitary confinement he had played chess in his head. He played both sides. He said he did this to stay sane.

He said, *YOU MUST TRAIN YOURSELF TO IMAGINE CHESS MOVES INSTEAD OF TO THINK ABOUT THE FACT THAT YOUR CAPTORS DON'T UNDERSTAND YOU, OR THAT IT IS YOUR FAULT YOUR CAPTORS DON'T UNDERSTAND YOU OR THAT YOU SHOULD BE MORE LIKE YOUR CAPTORS. QUESTO È MOLTO IMPORTANTE.*

He said that he focused so hard on chess moves that bad thoughts couldn't get a leg in edgeways. And then when he got out of prison and played grand masters at chess, he won, even though he hadn't played actual chess in ages.

I said, *But you aren't in prison, Nonno, you could play with Nonna.*

And he laughed and said, *HER BRAINS ARE TOO SOFT, ONLY GOOD FOR COOKING, HA HA HA.*

Brushing the horses in Nonno Buti's stable, I tried to remember how Harry rode his horse. I remembered how far he leant forward over the saddle, how tightly he held the reins, how he moved with the horse as if he was flying inches above the horse's back. He was magnificent.

Nonno Buti let me practice jumping with his horse Geronimo. Only sitting in the saddle at first, then around the yard, then up and down the street. He was meant to call me Harry while I did it, but when he saw how I could jump the paling fence without that much of a run up he blew on his hunting trumpet and shouted *TALLY HO!*

But I could only ride like that if I was being Harry. Just like how Sister Katherine said that in Africa men ate other men, but they had to wear the skin of a cheetah to be able to do it.

Nonno said that if I didn't tell Nonna, I could take Geronimo out by myself.

I moved exactly like Harry as Geronimo and I slunk through the streets. No one could see us because there was nothing special to see—just a man and his horse, calling on a friend. The friend happened to be a ten-year-old girl playing hopscotch in the playground of Newtown School, but that was by the by. Amelia saw me tall and brave on Geronimo's slippery-dip back and ran straight over to join me.

We were out and blazing under the midday sun—me holding the reins, Amelia holding my waist—and it felt right to be part of the day like this. So much time had been wasted reciting the saints and pretending to learn how to read and all the while there were trees aching to be climbed and rivers thirsty for us to fling ourselves in, yodelling into the splash.

Wise Geronimo knew we could not do everything at once, and lead us to the best climbing tree in Wellington. It was the best because there were hundreds of different ways you could climb it and the places where you put your feet were worn smooth like banister railings. Once you got to the top you could see into the back gardens of the biggest houses in Thornodon. They had statues and swings and podiums and mazes, not fishing nets spread out to dry that smelled like rotting sludge from the bottom of the ocean.

Me and Amelia could see into one garden that was full of ladies in white dresses. Their hats looked like lids. If you pulled them off there would be humbugs inside their heads. They moved across the grass like swans—but Amelia said it wasn't grass, it was a *lawn*—so they moved across the *lawn* like swans. And when they laughed they didn't snort or throw their

heads back, they covered their mouths with their hands as if laughing was a sneeze that might give you typhoid.

Some of them were holding lace umbrellas even though it wasn't raining and some of them were holding tiny tea cups on tiny plates or were nibbling the corner of tiny white triangles but peeling their lips back first so that they didn't get crumbs on their faces. Everything was tiny and breakable, because being a lady was about not breaking things, and the winner was the person who couldn't break the tiniest thing.

There was a great climbing tree in the middle of the garden with the slow swan ladies in it, but no one was climbing it, they were too busy standing around, holding their tiny things.

Someone was playing a violin. It was a friend of Nonno Buti's. He was in a black suit with a gold chain on his waistcoat. He had his hair oiled, and he'd twisted the ends of his moustache so that it went up at the sides. Amelia Grey said he was trying too hard to look rich, like most Italians.

*I don't try to look rich, I said.*

*No, she said, but you know what I mean.*

Geronimo galloped us to the cricket and he cantered us to the wharf. Every day held a new adventure and word spread around Newtown school that we had started our own School of Life. We took on new recruits, but only the bravest survived.

We got a pig's bladder from the butcher in Newtown and even though it was still covered in blood and smelled like wee, it was great. You blew it up and tied off the end and it was tough, not like a balloon. You could kick it and punch it and use it to play rugby or you could fill it with water and squirt it at people when they walked past and they would be covered in bits of pig wee mixed with blood and water.

That time it was me, Amelia, the girls who said fuckit to the teacher at Newtown school, and a boy called Horatio de Courcey Martelli, but everyone called him Horse. I called the fuckit girls Fuckit and Buckit. I called the tall one who looked like a foal Fuckit and the short one who looked like a donkey Buckit. They didn't seem to mind. I think they got worse names at home.

We decided it was Amelia's birthday. Every day we took turns at having a birthday and walking into a shop saying *Hi mister, did you know it's Amelia's birthday?* or *Did you know it's Buckit's birthday?* and one in every three birthdays you would get a treat, or maybe even a penny but sometimes they would say, *Why aren't you at school?* and kick you out.

Because it was Amelia's birthday she had to blow the bladder up and wear it under her dress as if she was going to have a baby. That was funny for a bit, but then it got boring, so we sat on the gutter waiting for the butcher boys. Amelia still had the bladder up her dress and it was getting warm and slimy like a real baby. I thought for a second that I would like to have a real baby with Amelia, and then Fuckit said, *Watch this.*

Fuckit undid a safety pin from the back of her pinafore and smashed it into Amelia's baby. It was horrible. There was a wheezing sound and Amelia's stomach started to shrivel. She looked down at it, stunned. There was a warm sweet rotten smell coming out of it.

I pushed Fuckit so that she slipped on the blood and slumped in the gutter. Amelia looked down at the blood all over her dress as if she was about to swoon. I thought maybe Amelia needed to breathe, maybe I should undo the top of her smock so she could breathe. I went to rip open the top of her smock and she pushed me off, saying *What are you doing?*

Her brain had gone soft. She couldn't see that I was on her side, that I was saving her.

*Leave me alone! I didn't want the gross thing up my dress in the first place,* she said, and pushed me away from her so I slipped on the bladder and landed in the gutter as well.

The road was grumbling, and I wondered if an earthquake was about to split the city in two. Fuckit and Buckit ran across the street with Amelia, stepping on my hair and my hand as they did. Only Horse was still there, helping me up.

*The butcher boys are here, Tally Ho, come on, get up!*

In the distance we could see Raines with a pig's head under his arm and Harry who had two hams tied up by the trotters, hanging around his neck. Their horses were really going for it—dipping their heads down and rearing them back up again like waves crashing on a beach and rising up and crashing again. Harry was winning as usual, but then he stopped. Right in the middle of the race. I saw him catch the eye of a woman standing on the side of the road. She was laughing and waving and was wearing a hat covered in daisies. Her hair was a mess underneath. It looked like something birds made their nests out of. I suppose she looked pretty in the way weeds buzzing with flies are sometimes pretty, but just because she was smiling and waving Harry pulled out of the race.

*No! What are you doing?* I shouted at him. *Keep going, you were winning!* He was drunk on this woman with the bird's-nest hair. He pulled the horse up so that it swerved as it moved towards her and she plucked a flower out of her hat, reached up and put it in the string netted around his ham. Then he clutched his heart like someone had stabbed it with a javelin. It was all wrong. Harry had never put a woman before a race.

Without Harry being Harry, I wasn't sure how to be me. I felt naked riding around on Geronimo's back, and preferred to take my gang into tunnels and caves: dark underground places, where cicadas buried themselves until their shells were hard as steel.

We found a pipe. It was huge. You could stand up in it and not even bang your head. You could shout into it and then hear yourself shout back, like there was another you standing at the other end of the pipe. It smelled a bit, but you got used to it. It had green slime growing around its mouth where it emptied into the harbour which made the rocks beneath it slippery and dangerous and so much more exciting than school.

You had to see who could get across the rocks the fastest without falling into what came out of the pipe. It was usually me. If you fell in you had to sing 'Ave Maria' while gargling the water that dribbled out of the pipe.

In summer after lots of rain the pipe got so full that water bubbled out the manholes in Te Aro and all the people had to go from house to house in boats. I wished that happened in Newtown. Then Papà could fish in bed and the sheets could be sails and the pasta hanging

up could be seaweed and we could all float around the house by lying on our backs blowing water up into the air, pretending to be whales.

Once I saw a dead cat come out the pipe. It had a worm growing in its eye. You would think the cat would be soft but I hugged it and it was stiff.

After that I got sick, and Fuckit got cholera and almost died, so no one was allowed down there any more.

Buckit said it was my fault Fuckit almost died because I made her drink the pipe water after she fell off the rocks but it was her own stupid fault for falling when she knew the rules, and none of us could see the disease in the water anyway. They never did come back to the pipe after that.

Fear seeped into our gang. Fuckit and Buckit retreated to the dull safety of the school-room. Me and Amelia thought we could make our new headquarters the rocks under the Taranaki Wharf, but Horse was scared of drowning. He could climb right up to the top of a mast, but he couldn't swim. He was also scared of going to the toilet anywhere that wasn't at his house. He was happy to run through Newtown School with his willy out shouting *I'VE GOT MY WILLY OUT!* but if he needed to go to the toilet he held it in until he got home. You could tell when he was holding it because he jiggled around and if you said *Do you need to go to the toilet?* he'd say *No*, and then you'd say *Yes you do, you're squirming*, and he'd say *No I'm not, I'm dancing*, and move his hands around to make it look more like he was dancing. Then when he was anywhere near home he'd run faster than a witch with her hair on fire and as soon as he was behind the front gate he would piss right into the flowerbed, letting out a massive sigh. That's why their camellia bush was dead on one side and their front gate always smelled like wee.

*Just because you're behind the front gate doesn't mean no one can see you*, I said to him. I was standing on the other side of the gate. I reached out and touched him on the shoulder to prove my point. He flinched, as if my arm had reached out from another world.

*I know that*, he said, but he always went round the back after that.

It was amazing how much people thought you couldn't see—like the ladies picking their noses in carriages trotting by because they thought they were in a sealed capsule that only they could see out of. Or because it didn't count if poor people saw you pick your nose.

And later, so many people wouldn't see what was right in front of them.

Nonno Buti made a box for a rich Chinaman on the West Coast. It was a box with secret compartments so the Chinaman could hide his gold nuggets from the government.

We were standing in the back of Nonno Buti's workshop, admiring it. The box was lizard green, as big as an ice chest, and sitting in the middle of the workshop floor.

He said, *TALLY HO, TELL ME HOW MANY COMPARTMENTS THERE ARE IN THIS BOX!* but I didn't move. I wanted to admire it from where I was standing. *DAI*, he said, pushing me forward, *APRILA!*

Nonno Buti stepped back and watched me creep towards the box, then open and close all four of its compartments, breathe on the varnish, and tap each surface for spring-activated doors or secret hollow pockets. When I looked back up at him he was smiling so hard that tears were squeezing out the wrinkles at the sides of his eyes.

*There are four compartments*, I said, and Nonno Buti almost choked on his own laugh, he was that excited.

*NO, TALLY HO, THERE ARE TEN!*

It had taken Nonno Buti three months to make because he wanted it to be perfect, but now it was perfect and late so he needed a coachman to send it down to Greymouth quick smart.

I asked Nonno Buti who the coachman was going to be. Was it going to be Papà? Or Harry? But he said, *NO, TALLY HO, YOU ARE THE ONLY COACHMAN UP FOR THE JOB.*

It was going to be me!

He had that wild look he got when he was really excited. Like he wasn't really here, like he was riding around on shooting stars up in the solar system. That's when Nonno Buti was the most fun to be around and came up with his best ideas—the wooden whale with lots of little Jonah-shaped oyster forks inside its belly, for instance, or the saltshaker which was actually a bald man's head with terrible dandruff.

He said I could have Geronimo to keep if I thought I could make the trip in a week.

*A week? But I've never even been there before!*

---

*I KNOW, TALLY HO, BUT AFTER YOU'VE FOUND YOUR WAY THERE IN A WEEK YOU WILL MOST CERTAINLY KNOW HOW TO GET THERE IN LESS THAN A WEEK IN THE FUTURE, WON'T YOU!*

He said it not like a question, but like a fact:

The altitude of Mount Cook is 12,341 feet.

The capital of Italy is Rome.

Tally Ho will ride a horse to the West Coast in less than a week.

All that night I lay awake thinking of a horse that could get me to the West Coast. I decided I'd need a horse that has an extra flap of skin that can be tied up on its back, or un-tied and buttoned onto its legs to make fins. This way, when the flap is tied up above its back, it could conceal its gills when on land, and then when the fins are buttoned down it would be able to breathe underwater when we crossed the Cook Strait. It would also have a head like a seal so that it could swim really fast, and would be blue so that it didn't look out of place with the other fish.

I'd seen a blue person before. Well, not really a person. A baby. It was my little brother who was born in Wanganui before we moved to Wellington. He slept the wrong way up in his cradle and in the morning he was blue. I asked Papà why the baby was blue and Papà whacked me across the back of my head with his shoe. Mamma was sobbing in the kitchen and boiling cloths to put on the baby to make him hot again, and I had to hold the baby and breathe on it. Papà was trying to get his feet in his shoes without un-doing the laces so he could get to the doctor but he didn't have a horse so he had to steal the neighbour's new bicycle. He'd never ridden a bicycle before but he learned straight away that morning. I always think about Papà on the stolen bicycle when I'm trying to do something I don't know how to do. I think: *If you don't get it right a baby will die*, and then I work it out straight away.

When we were in Wanganui Papà was a fisherman like he is now, but back then Mamma and me would go down and meet him in the afternoon when the water was white as milk and the sky was the colour of jam. The fish piled up on the wharf made one big monster with a hundred eyes and sometimes tentacles, too, and broken jaws on all of its faces.

Once they really did catch a monster. It was a giant blue fish that was as long as Papà and five times as fat. It took ten men to drag it up onto the beach and its whole right eye was as big as my head. The fish was very surprised to find that things could live out of the water. He was trying to work out where the coral and seaweed had gone, and why everything was pressed down onto the ground and not floating around his head like it usually was.

A man saw me staring into the eye of the fish and asked me if I knew why it was blue. I said no, and he said it was because it had turned into a man-fish after being a brown woman-fish.

*Why are the women-fish brown?* I asked, and he shrugged and said he didn't know, they were just more boring.

When the baby turned blue I asked Papà if it was turning into a man-fish. Papà didn't reply, he only had strength left to steal the neighbour's bicycle and work out how to ride it.



And guess what colour the bicycle was? It was brown, not blue, and by the time Papà came back the baby had died.

The morning after Nonno Buti gave me my West Coast assignment I went straight to his house. Nonno Buti was at work but Nonna was in the kitchen cutting up tomatoes. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen for a second and waited for her to ask me what I was up to. She didn't.

I sighed loudly, and she reached up to untie the oregano that was hanging in the window. Then I nuzzled my head between her bosom and the arm she was using to cut the tomatoes. Nonna had a lot of bosom, so this maneuver could cause suffocation if I didn't push her bosom in with my forehead to create an air pocket for my mouth.

Nonna still didn't ask me anything. She gave me a slice of tomato to eat and kept cutting. It was hard to chew squished between her arm and her bosom, so I had to pull my head out, swallow and tell Nonna that I was going to become a cart driver on the West Coast.

She stopped cutting and asked, *What, when you grow up?* and I said, *No, next week, to deliver a secret box to a Chinaman.*

Straight away Nonna said *Buti!* under her breath and wiped her red hands on her apron so that it looked like she was covered in watered-down blood.

When I visited Nonno Buti at his workshop the next day I could see that he was very sad, as if the stars he had been riding around on in the solar system had finally crashed into the ocean and now he was deep under the water where the giant fish had been. He said, *Mi dispiace, Tally Ho, you cannot take Geronimo out any more. You will have to wait until you are older before you can make deliveries for me.*

I wasn't worried, though. Nonno Buti once told me that anything was possible if you imagined it hard enough, it just mightn't happen the way you expected. He wanted to be the first man on the moon when he was a kid, for instance, but he ended up in New Zealand next door to a man who sold telescopes, which was close enough.

When Papà came home that night he was thrown into the room by a fierce wind, but it wasn't a southerly or a northerly, it was coming from inside him and it was pushing him towards me.

I was sitting on the floor shelling peas into a bucket. I could have sat at the table, but I liked sitting on the floor because I could fold my legs up like a foal.

He stopped in front of me. The wind was still pushing, but he was standing still so the wind was running circles up against the inside of his face, making it red.

*What are you doing?* he said. I thought it was obvious.

*Shelling peas,* I said.

He picked me up by the back of my collar. The front of the collar choked up under my chin. Then he walked me out the back door still holding me up like this, like I might actually be a foal who didn't know how to use its legs yet.

---

When we were out the back he looked around. He wasn't sure which way to go next, so we stopped there, near the back door. It slammed shut, and I jumped because I thought for a second that I'd been smacked, but it was only the door. Nothing hurt.

*Do you know who I spoke to down at the jetty?* he asked me. It wasn't a question I was supposed to know the answer to, but I had to say something otherwise I'd get whacked, so I said, *No.*

*Sister Katherine is who. And do you know what Sister Katherine said to me?*

*No.*

*She said, "I hope your daughter is feeling better, everyone misses her so." Have you been sick?*

I coughed because my throat felt scratchy after the collar had crushed it. Also to check if I was sick. Maybe I was sick. There was still time. I opened my mouth and tried to catch some pollen on my tonsils.

*Pitiful, Papà said. Why aren't you going to school? We bring you to this country for a better life, and you are not going to school. Why? What are you going to do?*

This time I wasn't supposed to answer. I could have told him it was alright, that I was going to be a coachman on the West Coast, but he didn't want to know. His eyes weren't saying *Tell me the answer*, his eyes were scared, like he was looking in a mirror and saw a monster—half lizard, half cicada—open its wings to fly away.

Papa said if I was going to run around like a boy instead of going to school then I would have to work like a boy and see how I liked it.

I nodded, and looked at my shoes, and tried to act punished.

We sailed to Rona Bay on the side of the harbour where the jungles were full of warriors and the sands were golden and flying fish leapt out of the water and into your boat, sacrificing themselves for your dinner. At first the other fishermen were quiet because Papà did not often fish with them and now he was here with a kid who kept jumping around. They wanted to talk about women and fights and horses, not be on their best behaviour.

*Ah, don't worry, Tally Ho is tough as old boots,* Papà said, but he looked more worried than them because we both knew his old boots needed to be re-soled every month and weren't very tough at all.

When we started sailing over to Rona Bay the moon was up and the sound of waves licking the boat made all the fishermen feel as small as prawns, so they talked to make themselves feel less edible. A man called Bert did most of the talking. He told me he came here by accident when he was fourteen after he was shipwrecked in a place where people wore gold in their noses and rode elephants through the streets. He got on a ship he thought was going to Australia but instead it came here.

*Why didn't you stay there and have a pet elephant?* I asked, and he said, *Because I wanted to see what life would be like at the end of the earth.*

It turned out life at the end of the earth was the same as it was in Italy but colder, and with less military service.

If I'd been allowed to talk I would have told the other fisherman that I already knew how to row properly. You don't sit down like you see New Zealanders do, you stand up like they do in Venice. Then you can row for hours. But instead the other men talked and I sat next to Papà while he tied knots in his dragnet. I held the net up so it didn't get tangled, but Papà touched me on the arm and said, *No, don't hold it like that. Give it to me, it will be quicker.*

When we got to Rona Bay, the other men took the smaller boats around past the rocks, and Papà and I stayed in the big boat out in the harbour. He was quiet and I was trying to think of things to say. A penguin swam past with its head sticking up out of the water.

*Look Papà, a penguin!* I said.

He nodded. After I said it, it seemed like a stupid thing to say. He could see that it was a penguin. He knew what a penguin looked like.

*Good weather for fishing!* I said.

I hoped it was good weather for fishing. I wanted to show him that I knew.

I watched Papà move the rudder. He was squinting out into the horizon. The sun wasn't all the way up yet, but the clouds were bright in that way that made you feel like you had soap in your eyes. He wasn't even looking at his hand move the rudder. Papà could do lots of things without looking. He could tie a knot by flicking his wrist and twisting the rope around his fingers, and sometimes he would reach out for a rope and tug it out from the blunt metal teeth that were holding it down, and then give it a pull, or loosen it, and the sail would flick around to the other side of the boat.

That was tacking. Tacking is when you change direction. And reefing is when you pull in the sail so it has less of a belly and the boat doesn't capsize. And port means left and starboard means right. If the sail gets loud and thrashes around like a horse going crazy, that means you're pointing into the wind and you need to make a decision about which way you're going to turn. I was trying to think of a way of showing Papà that I knew these things, but he was looking at where the birds were circling above the water with a tight look on his face that meant *Don't talk, I'm thinking very hard*.

The wind was strong. We only had one sail up and it was reefed, so it wasn't even all the way up. The wind was strong enough that boat was tipped over to the side and we had to lean in the other direction to balance things out. Then Papà said *Take the helm*. He said it without even looking at me. *Take the helm*, like I would know exactly what to do. I couldn't believe it. I stared at him, and he said *Sbrigati, cambia il vento*, so I held the rudder with two hands, in case I accidentally let go with one of them.

I was steering the whole boat. I could have taken it out of the bay. I could have sailed to Australia or Italy or Ireland, but Papà said, *Pull the rudder to windward. To windward! Subito!*

I couldn't remember if windward was the way the wind was going, or where the wind was coming from. I moved the rudder to the direction that the wind was coming from. Which was the starboard side. The right side. East.

*No, windward!* he said. He pushed me off the rudder and moved it all the way to the port side, so far over that it touched the side of the boat. The sail started flailing around and I hoped what I had done didn't mean we were going to drown. I looked out for more penguins so Papà couldn't see my lip begin to quiver.

I saw one. Another one by itself, with its head straining up out of the water. He was looking really hard for something, anything, but he couldn't see us.

We caught warehou mostly, and seaweed, and an octopus and three dead tree branches. We caught the penguin, too. It was tangled in the net with a fish gripped in its beak. It was frightened, but it wouldn't let go of the fish. I had to grab the penguin on the body, holding

the wings down. It made a high, wheezy noise and tried to wriggle out of my hands, which meant *The net is wrapped twice around my left wing, please be careful.*

*Here, let me do it,* Papà said, reaching over.

*No, I can do it,* I said. I already had his head half-untangled, but Papà brushed me aside with his arm so that I slipped off the seat and the penguin pecked him on the finger. He said, *Cazzo del uccello!* and ripped it out of the net so that it got a deep cut in its wing, and threw it back into the sea. The bird swam away with its head straining forward, squawking an alarm signal to all the other penguins in the harbour. *Don't go near that boat, they will try to rip your wings off.*

*See?* Papà said. *You would have hurt yourself.*

On our way back to Wellington, I didn't feel like doing anything but watch the mountains in the very far distance. Bert saw me looking and told me that on the other side of those mountains was the West Coast. He said you could find gold in the ground there, but it was very wild country and you had to be careful not to get eaten by pigs. You could have a Māori guide which helped you not get eaten by pigs, but it raised your chances of getting eaten by Māoris.

Mamma always said that when we first came to Wanganui the Māoris used to come to her door. They would trade a whole wild pig for a cake of soap, then eat it like cheese. Mamma laughed every time she told that story, but she forgot that she couldn't speak English when she got off the boat and accidentally bought cheese instead of soap once from the grocer.

The other fishermen sang songs about Napoli and cried about leaving their mamas, even though they were grown men. *Then why did you leave?* I asked them, and they shook their heads as if to say I could never possibly understand.

Papà didn't fish with them again. When we took the fish to the Taranaki Wharf the fishmongers saw how dark the other fishermen were and wouldn't buy the fish from us. The other men were Italians like us, but because they were from the south they looked more like Greeks. We were from the north and if we kept our mouths shut and stayed out of the sun we looked like regular New Zealanders. Even so, the fishmongers waited for the Scottish fishermen. Papà wrapped two big warehou in newspaper to take home and threw all the rest into the harbour right in front of the fishmongers' eyes. He said Italians once ruled the earth. Italians built the roads in Scotland, but it was too long ago for anyone to remember.

The sky was the colour of cloudy lemonade and getting clearer by the second as we walked along the waterfront with our two fish. There were so many ships. At least one of them had to be a pirate ship. There were clippers and steamers and barques and full-rigged ships. They squished their fenders against the dock, *creak creak*, as if their fenders were fat pigs with secrets and the ships were holding them up against the dock until they gave up and told everything. There were piles of boxes and crates and barrels too, and sometimes men in coats buttoned all the way up walking with legs stiff as guns, making sure nothing got stolen. Then there were the men huddled behind the gates, waiting for work. There were thousands of them, it seemed, and who should I see in the throng of hungry men, but Harry Crawford the butcher boy.

*Papà look!* I said, and Papà said, *What now?*

*Isn't that the butcher boy from Newtown, Papà? Why would he need to line up down here?*

*Well, the man's got to eat,* Papà said. *He can't survive on scraps from the butcher. You're lucky you have a Papà to feed you fish at a time like this.*

*But I'm a fisherman now,* I said. *I can feed myself.*

He shook his head and said, *No, cara. That's enough of these silly games. Tomorrow, you go back to school.*

The next morning I threw a rock at Amelia Grey's window and said *Ngarl nymph thoro!* which meant *Hurry up, let's go to the quay!* in the language we made up. Amelia took forever to come outside. I knew she was there because her blind was all the way up which was code for *I am at home*, so I sat on the bit of the paling fence where there weren't any palings and waited.

A woman looked at me through the lace curtains of Amelia's living room window. It was probably her mother, but I couldn't be sure.

When Amelia finally came out she was wearing a white dress with a waistband like the swan ladies, not the smock she usually wore. She had her hair down and brushed. It was wavy and golden and some of it was pinned up underneath a flower. It was a real flower. A bee the size of my thumb was hovering near it, preparing to land. I went to swipe it away, but she said it didn't matter. She said she couldn't come out anyway because she was getting ready to go to a new college for ladies.

*Do you want to go to the quay afterwards?* I asked her, but Amelia had already gone inside and shut the door.

I went down to the quay with Horse instead.

*To the West Coast!* I cried, and we snuck on board a Norwegian barque to play the Ship Game. Horse was Captain Martello and I was First Mate Eugene, but Horse spent most of his time sitting inside the giant coils of rope on deck. He was weird like that. He would always find small spaces to sit in. He said it made him feel safe. I didn't need to sit in small spaces in order to feel safe. I knew I would never feel safe. My skin would always prickle as if one layer had been ripped off and my nerves were flailing around like tentacles. Amelia Grey didn't need to sit in small spaces to feel safe either. Amelia Grey had a safe feeling inside her wherever she went, as if she believed nothing bad would ever happen to her, which is probably why nothing bad ever did.

When I got home there were tomatoes spread out on trays in the grass, tomatoes lined up along the top of the front fence, tomatoes on the roof, seeds up, and the sun was reaching down saying, *Grow, grow!* and the tomatoes were saying, *No, fuck off, we don't want to!* and shrivelling up instead. There were trays with tomatoes on them balanced on top of the pumpkin vine in the vegetable garden, and tomatoes instead of fishing nets spread out across the grass, and inside someone was moaning. The house looked whiter than usual. It looked sick.

In the kitchen there was a puddle of something red spilt on the floor—some of it bright tomato red and some of it dark wine red. Papà was pacing the corridor and I could hear that the moans were Mamma's and were coming from the bedroom.

*What's wrong with Mamma?* I asked.

And Papà said, *What do you think, Tally Ho? It's time for the baby!*

When I opened the bedroom door Mamma reached out for me. Her hair was out again, and mussed up all over the pillow. You would think it would be easy for her after having had so many babies, but she was wailing like she was going to be sick. *Tiralo fuori!* she said. *Get it out!* Nonna was standing at the end of the bed, looking between Mamma's legs, ready to catch in case it shot out like a cannonball.

And then it did.

It shot out. The baby couldn't wait any longer.

The other babies had held on to the inside of Mamma for as long as they possibly could, but this baby wasn't afraid of anything. The baby didn't even cry. The baby laughed and clutched at Nonna's hair. The baby was strong and wouldn't let go. The baby tried to eat the hair. The baby had a deep voice. The baby was a boy.

*Un maschio! Un maschio!* Nonna cried out.

Papà couldn't help himself, he flung the bedroom door open and clutched the boy, covering him with fat tears and kisses.

*Un maschio! Finalmente!* he said and took the boy to Mamma and covered her with tears and kisses too.

All that day people were coming over with fried eggplant and crayfish and mullets in tomato sauce. They drank their way through Papà's wine. They slapped him on the back. Every now and then Papà would come back down to earth, look at me and say, *Where are your sisters? Go and play with your sisters.*

When Father Kelly came, it was decided the baby was going to be called William. A solid name for a solid New Zealander boy, and from that moment on I knew I would hate him forever.

They were scared Baby William would die because all their other boy babies had died, and so they tiptoed around him always, as if he was nothing but a phantasm that might vanish if they ever sneezed or gave him the wrong food for breakfast. *Oh, don't wake William. No, don't give him an apple, he doesn't like those. No, he doesn't like honey on bread, don't even think about putting honey on that bread,* they'd say and William would look back at them with an idiot look on his face because he was a baby and that's what babies do. My parents tried to work out exactly what he wanted at all times in case he died and they had to live the rest of their lives thinking perhaps they hadn't paid enough attention to how much he did or didn't like apples or honey on bread. And if you were scraping the burnt bits out of the bottom of a pan when you were doing the washing up, it was all *No! No! Cosa fai? You'll wake Baby William!* in a whisper loud enough to wake Baby William and then whose fault was that but yours if he started screaming? I couldn't stand it any more.

I could dislike honey on bread too if it would make them like me better and meant I could get out of cleaning the whole kitchen after every meal, but I knew it wouldn't, so I packed a few things. I took a can of sardines. I took some bread and a bottle of wine in case I might need to trade it for something. Then I walked. I walked until my feet bled and kept walking until my feet couldn't bleed any more and the bones stuck out of my feet. I didn't stop until I saw a tall chimney injecting the clouds in the sky full of smoke, and thought, *Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll get a job and earn more than Papà. That will show them.*

I walked up the driveway of the place with the chimney, right past a dray being drawn by four horses. The dray they were tugging was heavy with bricks and the horses had stopped in the middle of the driveway saying, *Why should we bother when the sun is out and the grass is long and delicious?* but then the driver whipped them and they said, *Oh that's right, we'd forgotten about the whip,* and kept pulling.

I walked past the horses, through the main gate and right to the edge of the brickworks. It was crawling with men snuffling through mud like pigs. There were no hats or babies for miles and I thought, *Yes, this is the place for me.*



I found the man who was pointing and ordering people around the most, thinking that would be the man who was in charge, and I said, *Will you give me a job please sir?*

And Sir said, *What—to a girl?* and started laughing and looking around him as if he was expecting a chorus of people to erupt into laughter with him, but there was no one there, they were all in the quarry working.

Well, I was going to show him too.

I walked out of the quarry, past the whipped horses who were still hemming and hawing over the deliciousness of the uneaten grass and continued to walk when the dark spilled into the sky, and kept walking until I saw the dark dissolve around a lit up house.

I went up to the front door of the house, and—holding the bottle of wine out in front of me so they wouldn't think I was a beggar—knocked on the door.

A mother answered the door. She looked distracted. I could tell she was a mother because I could hear a baby crying in the background. She turned to it and said, *Oh William, hush now!* and I thought, *Not another fucking William, they are everywhere.*

I made to leave but then the mother smiled down at me. She wasn't wearing flowers in her hat, she was wearing no hat at all, and only had a few teeth. She clearly couldn't afford dentures or couldn't be bothered with looking pretty anymore seeing as she already had a husband and a baby.

I said, *Please ma'am, do you have any scissors?*

She laughed and said, *What do you want scissors for, kid?*

Behind her a young boy of about my age ran towards the sound of the screaming baby. I said to the mother I would give her this very fine Italian wine in exchange for a use of her scissors. She stopped and considered this for a second, which seemed to take all the energy she had because she froze and looked up into the top right corner of her head where all her thoughts were already tucked into bed for the night. Finally her eyes came back downstairs into her face and she said, *Oh alright, you seem to be a fairly harmless little girl to me.* Then she screamed at the boy, *JOE, COME 'N' SHOW THIS KID WHERE THE SCISSORS ARE KEPT, WILL YA?*

Joe came up to the door. He had a tooth missing. He had hair sticking up in all the wrong places. He had pants that were too big and rolled up at the ankles and a shirt that looked like it had been worn by seven generations of potato farmers and braces that were holding up the too-big pants. His Mamma went to stop the baby from screaming, so Joe and I were left to stand there and look at each other. I was sure he had never seen a girl before just as I had never seen a boy with lashes so dark and soft they belonged to the eyes of a mare.

I remembered what Amelia once said about boys being only after one thing and said, *Hey Joe, have you ever been with a woman before?*

He stared. Then blinked. *I'm twelve,* he said.

*Well, these are uncertain times, Joe, you don't know what's going to happen next. They say we're all about to become communists so you better get a feel while you've still got the chance.*

*Um, the scissors are above the sink in the shed, you can get them yourself if you want,* Joe said, then turned to go back inside.

*Oh no, Joe, I don't think I could possibly reach them by myself,* I said, grabbing him by the sleeve. *Why, I'm just a little girl.*

Joe frowned as if he was trying to work out how to spell *parallel* or *gnome* and finally said, *Oh, alright,* then led me around the side of the house to the shed.

The shed wasn't really a shed, it was more like three bits of metal propped up around a tap, but above the tap there was a plank of wood with nails sticking out, a tool dangling from each one. He reached up and lifted the scissors off their nail, and as he did I could see that the hair around the back of his neck curled like the feathers on the bum of a duck.

He turned around and there I was, standing in the doorway of the shed, not about to move away for anyone, especially not him.

*Now Joe, I said, If you take off your trousers, I'll take off my dress.*

*I thought you wanted the scissors,* he said.

*I did and I still do, but I thought I would give you a present first.*

*Why would taking off my trousers be a pres—*, he started to say, but I lifted my dress straight up and he stopped talking.

I couldn't see him because I had my skirts in front of my face but I knew he was standing there with his jaw dangling by its hinges and I said, *What, Joe, you never seen a naked woman before?*

But Joe wasn't staring, he was looking down at the scissors, scraping off the rust. *Yep,* he said, *I see my mum naked all the time.*

*But mums aren't really women, are they, Joe, especially not yours. She doesn't look like this, does she?* and Joe squinted at up me.

*So Joe, I said, if you cut off my hair, I'll let you stick your penis in here,* and I put my fingers in my vagina.

*Why would I want to do that?* he said. *Why didn't you just ask me to cut your hair?*

*Will you cut it then? Will you cut it like yours, Joe?* I asked.

*My dad did it when he was drunk.*

*I think it looks perfect, exactly as it is.*

Joe looked at me, all hopeful, saying *Really?* and I did my sweetest smile yet and said, *Yes, Joe, really.*

He cut my hair off with only five snips of the scissors and when he snipped the last snip I held his hand that was holding the scissors and turned around so that the scissors were being held between us, a silver lily with dangerous sharp leaves, and pushed my hands all the way down until the scissors were pointing straight at his penis, which is when I said, *Take your pants off right now.*

He opened his mouth and started to shout *M—*

But before he could say *—ummy* I shoved the scissors closer—but not too close because I didn't want to rip a hole in what would soon be my new trousers.

He took off his trousers and took off his shirt and kicked them over to the corner, so I took off my dress and did the same.

We both stood there in our underclothes and maybe it was the wind bringing out the goose bumps on my arms, or maybe it was the blue shadows that dragged under his eyes, but I suddenly felt horrible.

*I'm sorry*, I said.

*It's cold*, he said, and started to cry.

His singlet was grey with stains in a way that made his skin bright white and the moon lit him so he glowed like a saint or a rabbit that was about to get skinned.

*You can put my dress on now if you like, Joe*, I said.

He started laughing. He laughed so hard strings of snot yo-yoed out his nose.

*No way, I'm not a girl! Yuck!* he said, and caught the dangling snot with his tongue, and licked it up.

*Right*, I said, and stopped feeling sorry for him. I put on the trousers and the shirt, and left him shivering by the tap. They fit perfectly, like Joe was the one who had stolen them from me all along.

I slept behind a mulberry bush on the side of the road, and as soon I woke I went back to the brickworks for another try at a job. I found the man who had been doing all the pointing and ordering around.

*I need some work*, I said.

*Oh, we're a boy now, are we?*

*Yep*, I said, *I've always been a boy, they dressed me wrong before.*

*Well, I can't pay you the full amount. Only a ha'penny a day, or the real boys will get jealous.*

When he smiled, I saw that his teeth were brown pebbles. The spit in his mouth was mud.

Working in the brickworks was easy enough. I didn't understand why they thought only men could pull clumps of clay out of the ground, pat them into wooden blocks and bake them in an oven. It was like baking bread, except instead of carefully measuring out ingredients you pulled fistfuls of clay out of the ground and whacked it into a mould. Actually it was hard in that your muscles ached, the sun smacked you on the back of the neck and you worked in a permanently hunched position so that by the time the sun went down you were convinced you'd never stand up to see the horizon again, but in comparison to school it was like skipping through a field full of butterflies, all of them pouring honey in your mouth whenever you opened it to breathe.

The other workmen didn't talk much because if they did their clay faces would crumble back into the quarry and they'd lose the cigarettes from their mouths. We worked in silence until I got something wrong and one of the clay men ripped the wrong thing out of my hand to make it right, then went back to smoking and getting his arms half covered in red mud the way they ached to be.

Later the men sat around and made a cup of tea and lit a fresh ciggie. They still didn't say much, but when they did it was a joke at someone else's expense. Only the sissies didn't know how to take it.

One man with a smoke-grey beard and depressing operas droning on in his eyes looked up at me over his tea and said, *What, you can't be more than eight years old, boy.*

*No I'm not, but whatever I am, I'm further away from the grave than you*, I said, because you had to show them you could fight back.

His eyes lit up for a new comedy scene and he said, *Oh really?* then picked me up as easy as he would pick a mangy cat out of the bin and threw me down into the bottom of the quarry. I was sure something must have broken—how could you fall that far and not break anything?—but being young and made of rubber, everything sprang back into place.

*Looks like that's pretty close to a grave to me,* he said, and the other blokes laughed, even the man with the pebble teeth.

*They want me dead,* I thought, *I have to leave before this quarry really does become my grave,* but when I climbed out of the quarry the man who threw me down slapped me on the back so that I almost fell back in. Another man handed me a tin mug half filled with grey-white water he called tea.

*Ah, you're alright, kid,* he said. *You're alright.*

When the clay dust hovering above the quarry turned dark red, red as the sky, and all the other men were packing up their things and getting ready to leave, I stayed back and cleaned my tools for a third time. *I bet they haven't even noticed I'm gone,* I thought. Papà would be fishing extra late trying to provide enough for a son, and Mamma would have her giant breast shoved in her new son's face. The son would be fat and stupid and laughing at something only an idiot would laugh at—its own poo, for instance, or a dribble of vomit—and meanwhile my sisters would be cooking and cleaning the house even though they were only five and three and two years old.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

*Eh, kid,* said the man with the pebble teeth. *I think it's time you went home now,* he said, his teeth grinding dust.

He gave me a whole penny for my work, not the ha'penny he said he was going to pay me.

*I don't have a home,* I said.

The man sighed. *You can't go telling me that or I'll have to take you to one of them industrial schools.*

My face went slack. I could feel a twinge of tears and had to do everything I could to make them go away. I thought of horses. Harry's horse. Harry winning the race. How I would be just like him one day. How could I go back to sitting hunched over spelling tests while slow nuns shuffled around dreaming up more things that could be counted as sins and outside the trees grew slowly and the flowers budded slowly and the grass never grew at all because it kept getting cut before it could even start? The thought of it made me feel dead already.

*I would rather be buried alive in this quarry,* I said to Mr Pebble Teeth.

He smiled but frowned at the same time, as if he was trying to push the smile right off his face.

*Alright kid,* he said. *How about you bring your father by tomorrow, and if he says you can work then you can work.*

I decided to walk back from Miramar, sticking by the water as much as possible. You never knew if there would be a pirate ship looking for a new deck boy a mile off shore. *Arrr, you there me matey,* they'd call out through a conch the size of a ham, *come over 'ere and help me feed the parrots—they be awfully restless this evenin' with the storm brewin'.* I'd run down

the hill, climb over the rocks, swim out to the ship, and they'd throw a rope down but before it even hit the water I'd swing right up and land on deck.

Unfortunately, while working out the names of my future parrots (Hello Sailor, Peaches, Echo, Long John), I'd managed to get back to Coromandel Street. I stood outside the front gate of my house and couldn't seem to move. Baby William was crying. Mamma was saying *Shhh, shhhh*. Someone dropped a plate in the washing up tub and Papà said, *ATTENTO, FAI PAURA AL BIMBO* which had the neighbour's dog barking its face off, convinced I was some kind of thief. I felt like one, too, because I was standing there on the outside of my gate thinking, *Who are these people? I have never met them before in my life.*

I slept in the pumpkins. It was a clear night with no wind for a change, and I wanted to sleep outside. Bedrooms would be too small for the size of my dreams now that they'd be full of the stuff of the wide working world. There would be men made of clay rising up from the earth to replace all the sissy men who couldn't handle life out here at the edge of the world, and there would be parrots with wings made of my own hacked-off hair and women with no teeth smiling and saying *Life's alright once you burn all the hats*. But before I dreamed these things I thought of Harry. His polished shoes were glinting slightly north of the Southern Cross and between all his fingers and toes were lit, hand-rolled cigarettes. His mouth was a wisp of cloud saying, *She'll be right, mate.*

*Who is "she"?* I asked him.

He looked stunned for a second. *It's a phrase that you say*, he said.

*But it must have started somewhere. What had happened to her that made people worried she wouldn't be right?*

*That's funny*, Harry said, *I'd never thought about that before*. He took a drag from one of his cigarettes before adding, *Maybe she had a hard time giving birth, or something like that, whoever she was.*

*Harry*, I asked, *Why don't you ride your horse any more? Why don't you race the other butcher boys?* Harry wriggled his toes in his shoes, making them glimmer, and said, *I'm all tangled up with a woman now, kid. Have to earn proper money if I even want to think about having a family.*

*Why would you want to think about that? Why don't you go to sea, become a pirate or an island trader?*

Harry shook his head. *I doubt there would be any woman in the world as beautiful as mine*, he said, which annoyed me so much I couldn't talk to him any more, let alone sleep. How did he know what there was and wasn't out in the world? There could be an island in the Pacific full of women with skin made out of real chocolate with raisins for nipples for all he knew, he had never left this place to find out. This was like how Father Kelly would look out of his window and sigh and say, *How can people refuse to believe in God when—look at the harbour so still! And the hills rising up on either side of her like a brilliant green chorus praising God! How else could a world so miraculous come into existence if it weren't for Our Lord making it so?* I knew Father Kelly was too dull to dream up anything other than the hill

behind Thorndon, Mount Victoria, and a bit of flat water in between. He would never be able to imagine a place so miraculous it made your chest fizz like spit in sherbet every time you walked outside. It was as if there was a lid on the top of Father Kelly's head stopping him from imagining what you can't see with your eyes. But now Harry, too. Maybe he could only see his life play out as far as the butcher's on Constable Street. Maybe he would always get the same cheap mince and stop in on Mrs Wilson for a brandy snap sometimes, and only dream of the woman with the messy hair, even after she leaves him for Raines and he is left to find that the stiff patterns of his life will only flow with life again after downing seven beers. That's what happened to men here. They saw themselves as frontier men, but really they turned the wild and unknown into something safe that looked a bit like Glasgow.

I couldn't sleep knowing Harry was as feeble as that. I needed to start the whole vision over again, this time with Harry's shoes twinkling not because they were polished, but because he was sitting in a paddock in front of a fire he'd made with his own hands out of a few cow pats and dried driftwood collected from the beach. Yes, this new Harry sat there with his legs spread, saying, *Ah, kid, did I tell you about the time I was on a trading vessel in the Pacific? The women there! Nipples sweet as raisins! Skin like chocolate! And what, save Mary, has happened to your hair?*

*What?* I said.

Mamma was standing with the sun rising behind her, Baby William on one hip and a tub of washing on the other, looking like she was about to drop them both before the image of her daughter asleep in the pumpkins, wearing some filthy boy's trousers and her hair all cut off.

Mamma didn't drop the washing and she certainly didn't drop Baby William. She bent down slowly, sucking the air through her teeth so I knew how much it pained her, carrying the weight of the baby and the weight of the wet washing in addition to the weight of the world. She placed the tub of washing in front of me and said, *Peg this up will you, I have to feed William his second breakfast, he is such a hungry growing boy.*

Rosie and Ida were standing in the back doorway, staring like they'd had their brains eaten out by termites while I was gone. I walked past them, past Papà, took a loaf of bread off the kitchen table and a tin of sardines from the pantry, gripped a salami that was hanging above the stove and yanked it down. Papà winced as if I'd gelded him.

*O signore!* he said.

*I see,* I said. *You only notice me when I'm a boy.*

With that I turned to leave, but Papà materialised in front of me.

*Fine. You want to work? You can get a job.*

*Really?*

*Yes.* He looked up to see if God was watching him lie.

*No more school?*

*No more school.*

*Well I already found a job, Papà, but I need to you to come and give permission.*

He nodded. Maybe it was a twitch. Papà no longer looked like a man who knew how to make cray pots and fishing nets. He'd become the nervous director of a nativity play and our house was the set. It had to be perfect for the guest of honour, none other than Baby William himself.

I walked into the room I shared with Ida to get my things for work and found that our bed had vanished and in its place stood a tiny crib with two small idiot hands sticking out, waving hocus pocus in the air. Beneath them a baby drooled.

*Where is my bed?* I asked the idiot creature, and it said, *Gaarrgrlg.*

*What have you done with my bed you devil spawn?* I said, and behind me Mamma muttered, *Madonna mia! Forgive my daughter for the things she says, she has become possessed.*

My things had been moved into the other girls' room—four of us squished together in two small beds. It was a miracle of geometry. I pulled the pillowcase off my pillow, threw in the salami and the bread and said, *I'm going to work, and I'm going on my own.*

*Work?* Rosie said, her eyes large and anxious. *No one works on a Sunday, it's a sin.*

*Sunday? It's not Sunday!*

*Yes it is, and it's time for Mass,* Ida said.

They were both wearing explosions of lace with blue sashes around their waists. They had bonnets on their heads, covered in so many flowers a bee would have overdosed with joy. Mamma was standing in the bedroom doorway pressing the baby's head into her breast. *Drink me up, drink my life's blood dry. God knows the rest of them will if you don't.*

Rosie pulled what used to be my best Sunday dress out of my pile of things on the mattress, except it wasn't white any more, it was pink.

*Scusa,* Mamma said without looking sorry. *Ida tried to scrub the beetroot in with the laundry, so now it seems your sheets and things have gone pink.*

Ida giggled. *You hate pink.*

The window was locked and they were clustered in the doorway. There was no escaping the dress. I would have pushed past Mamma but William went *schlup schlup schlup blergh* and vomited onto her chest. She laughed as if she was being tickled. *Ohhhh! Quanto sei carino,* she said, *you funny little joker.* Then she ran her finger through the vomit and licked it off, *num num num.*

With me in pink spliced between my white frilly sisters on the back of the dray we looked like a chunk of coconut ice being dragged through the streets of Newtown. We may as well have held up a sign which read *LOOK EVERYONE, HERE COME THE ITALIANS* with Mamma sitting up the front clutching a baby boy to her chest, her head veiled and lashes low hoping she looked the very image of the Virgin Mary now that she had a son. Beside me my sisters were saying:

*I'm going to live in a cave and only say the rosary until I die.*

*Me too.*

*And my hands and knees will be hard like the skin of a camel from all the praying.*

*Mine too.*

Mamma said, *That's right girls, now let's remember the rosary in English so we can show Father Kelly.*

And then everyone said, *Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee blessed art Thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of Thy womb Jesus Holy Mary mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death amen.*

They sounded like a swarm of hypnotized bees and I wondered if the cart was going too fast to make a run for it, but as soon as I worked out where I'd run Mamma dug her nails into my arm.

*You're not going anywhere, kiddo.*



Mass was three hours of watching men in dress-ups swing brass balls around and getting wept on by all the depressed Virgin Marys stuck up in the windows. Were they bored or sad? It was hard to tell. There were babies everywhere, too, big paintings of babies and next to them crosses, as if to say, *Don't get too excited, babies, this is where you're headed next.*

Through the smoke and the mutterings of *Domini corpus dominum porpoise* I felt something akin to a cold wet leaf blown in the face. It was a glance from Horse on the other side of the aisle.

*I like your pink dress and your new haircut,* his eyes were saying.

*Fuck you,* mine said back.

There was no relief. Standing outside on the cold stone steps afterwards Rosie tugged on Sister Katherine's gown and asked, *Tell us again about all the saints who share our names and how they died.*

*Well,* Sister Katherine said, her eyes fogging up, *There was Saint Emilia, she died in a cave, and then there was Saint Rosalina, she died in her house after getting sick and the skin on her hands and knees was like the skin on a camel from all the praying, and then there was Saint Rose who also died in a cave—*

I tried to ignore the howls in the pit of my stomach but the ghosts of millions of women who spent their lives sitting in a cave wishing they were dead so they could be with Jesus were hard to ignore.

As Sister Katherine went on and on I could see a tiger-yellow waistcoat flash between the black and grey parishioners. It got wilder and brighter as it moved closer. Inside the waistcoat was a man. He had hair that flopped into his eyes and a sideways smile aimed right at me. When he was standing next to me he lent in close and whispered, *Have these people always been insane?*

How did he know what I was thinking?

*It's written all over your face,* he said.

After Mass we squeezed into Nonna and Nonno Buti's house. The women were in the kitchen trying to be helpful but there were three times as many women as men so there were mountains of cream-filled cakes, and biscuits balancing on top of the cakes and icing sugar dusted over the whole lot and only three men to eat them—Papà, Nonno Buti and Baby William. The three men sat in the middle of the back terrace while more women stood around them, watching them eat, offering a tray of biscuits, or rushing forward to brush the crumbs off their laps. As a special case Mamma was allowed to sit in the middle with the men, but only because she had Baby William attached, sucking the life out of her chest.

I wasn't standing anywhere near the men. I was sitting by the front window watching the smell of cakes draw more men up the front steps. Horse came with his uncle, and so did the musician I saw in the garden at Thorndon. Then there he was: the man in the yellow waistcoat. He arrived astride a palomino gelding—twelve hands high at least—swung his leg over

the horse, lashed the horse to the fence, then moved up the front steps in an easy glide. As he entered the house his eyes struck mine. Something lit up in them like a flash of lightning a million miles away and I turned my face before anything inside me could catch on fire.

Nonna saw, though.

She said, *He's got lovely eyes, don't you think, Eugenia?*

I didn't say anything. She knew I didn't respond when people called me Eugenia, but she kept calling me that anyway. Papà came into the front room, greeted the man in the yellow waistcoat as if he were a prince, and together they went out onto the street. Through the window I watched them speak. Papà was red-faced and excited, the man was calm and collected. Then Papà shook the man's hand, and walked very quickly in the direction of our house.

*Eugenia?* Nonna said. *Not talking today?*

She put a hand on each of my shoulders and bent down to my level.

*There is no shame in your name. It is the same name as mine. It is the same name as Santa Eugenia, and do you know what she did?*

*Die in a cave?*

*No. I don't know where she died, but when she was alive she was the daughter of the governor of Egypt and fled her father's house dressed as a boy—not so different to your little adventure, eh? Then she became a Christian. She even became an abbot!*

Nonna said even the way you would if you were saying *God even loves hideous monsters like you!*

Nonna's face was so close I could see her moustache. It was made up of black hairs that got paler at the tips, as if they were frozen half way through an invisibility trick. *Women loved Santa Eugenia. One woman tried to make love to her, and when Eugenia said no the woman accused her of adultery—*

Nonna was talking for too long and I felt faint. The dead saints in the pit of my stomach grew louder, crying over their wasted lives. *I didn't realise life was all I had and now look, I'm dead I'm dead I'm deader than dead!*

*—then Santa Eugenia had to appear in court before none other than her own father as judge, and all was forgiven. Being a woman saved her from death. You see, it isn't so bad all the time ...*

Nonna saw what she thought was deep understanding in my still face, and straightened up as slowly and confidently as if she'd been announced the winner of all the prizes at the church picnic. She'd gotten through to me. She knew she was the only one who could.

But when I stood up there was a deep red stain on my seat. I touched the back of my dress and saw that my fingers were brushed with blood. The howls hadn't been the howls of saints stabbing themselves in the stomachs over their wasted lives, they'd come from my own body saying, *Well, you're a woman now, even if you don't want to be, ha ha ha*, and blowing blood bubbles into my knickers out of spite. Nonna put a cushion on the chair where I'd been sitting, smiled with a tear in her eye and shuffled me into her bedroom.

Through the window I could hear the men eating and the women saying how well the men were eating. Nonna folded a piece of cloth and showed me how to place it in the bottom of my knickers.

*The good news is you won't be wearing smocks any more, but the bad news is this means no more adventures in trousers for you!* She winked, as if trousers had only been a clever place to hide in a game of hide and seek.

*A nice full skirt will cover the new bulk in your knickers I think,* she said, and pulled a heavy mass of grey cloth out of the trunk at the end of her bed. It looked like something you put dead bodies in, before throwing them into the sea.

We returned home to find that our backyard was no longer blanketed with fishing nets. Instead there were bits of wood and bales of hay. Broken bits of Papà's fishing boat were strewn about the place, and the boats' ribs were showing. It looked like Papà was trying to build himself into a rotting whale.

*What are you doing, Papà?*

He hammered as he shouted into the wood that he was sick of having no one to help him, that he was sick of the men at the Taranaki wharf treating him like some lower animal, that he was going to start a carrier's business, and that would show them.

Tied up to the lemon tree were four palomino geldings. Papà had borrowed money from a hotelier—he wouldn't say his name—to buy the four geldings, but couldn't afford the wood for a stable so he'd had to take an axe to his own boat.

I walked towards the horses with my palm out for sniffing, and the horses nodded in approval. There are simple things you can do for a horse that don't involve talking or trying to be a certain way. You can put a stick in a tin of molasses and cover the stick with hay and give it to the horse as a treat. You can brush the horse, and pay attention to the way its coat shivers or doesn't. When I brushed Papà's horses it was as gentle and easy as breathing. That was all a person needed to do: brush a horse and say things to the horse that you knew it wouldn't understand and it would nod, not because it understood, but because it was adjusting its neck muscles, and that was fine also. I wished I had been born a horse into a family of horses instead of whatever monstrous in-between thing I was.

While Papà hammered I saddled and harnessed the horses to show Papà that I was better with horses than anyone he knew, but when he saw me with them he ripped the reins from my fingers and said, *No! Piantala! You will never get a husband like this.*

I refused to sleep in the glorified laundry heap with the other girls so I slept out in the pumpkins near the horses, my insides wringing themselves of blood as I did. In the morning old beer bottles were lined up in rows on the kitchen table and over breakfast Mamma announced she was getting ready to bottle the passata again. She looked straight past me. *Would you like to help?* she asked Ida and Emily.

I didn't have time for passata anyway. I had bricks to make, men to slap on the back like old mates, a body's weight of blood to purge.

*Where is Papà?* I asked. *I have to take him to work so he can give permission—*

*No,* came a voice from the front door, *I will take you to work.*

It was Nonna. She was standing in the kitchen in her church-going clothes. No one would go to a brickworks in church-going clothes. *This does not bode well*, I thought. *This does not bode well at all.*

Nonna took me to a white picket fence in Thorndon. It grinned like an underbite.

*This is not a brickworks*, I said, my insides twisting and burning. *This is the opposite of a brickworks.*

*A domestic*, Nonna said, *is a better job for you.*

*A domestic what?*

*Oh*, she said. *It will be just like what you're used to at home.*

*Five babies always trying to win a screaming competition?*

She looked nervous. *Maybe. And laundry to fold, and beds to make.*

She gave me two hairy kisses goodbye and as she did a thick coating of dust fell over the brickworks and the West Coast and all the hopes and dreams I'd ever had. They sneezed, then coughed, then died. A domestic. I'd never heard of a more boring job in my life.

Inside the mauve house the ceiling was so high you could have fit five horses stacked one on top of the other between it and the top of your head. I felt small and stupid in my heavy grey skirt with my fast-growing hair up underneath something you could use to make cheese. The housekeeper was compulsively dusting in the corner, thinking, *This little madam is definitely a thief just look at her grubby fingers, they've been in every coat pocket this side of town.* And I was thinking, *I wonder when she will stop dusting that one china horse over and over again.*

Finally the Lady of the House came in the front door. She peeled off her gloves as if she was trying to peel a peach without breaking the skin.

*Can you fold a sheet?* she asked me.

*Yes.*

*Can you do hospital corners on a bed?*

*Yes.*

*Then the girl's hired*, she said.

The housekeeper dropped the tiny horse she was dusting and it bounced across the rug, landing on her mistress's right foot. The Lady of the House looked down as if the housekeeper had just vomited the horse onto her shoe.

*Are your hands getting the shakes again, Mrs Pryce?* she asked the housekeeper.

*No, Ma'am. I'm sorry.*

If Mrs Pryce's hands weren't shaking before, they definitely were now. One was jittering all over the doorknob like a spider having a nervous breakdown, it just couldn't get a grip at all.

*Mrs Pryce, you'll need to show the girl where the sheets are kept*, the Lady said.

Mrs Pryce looked at me then. Her eyes were two currants someone had picked out of a scone, but one was slightly bigger so maybe that one was a raisin.

*Right*, she said. *Follow me, child.*

We walked down a wooden staircase, through a small blue door, around a corner, and down another wooden staircase that got narrower and darker as we went. Every third step or so would creak and Mrs Pryce would reach her hand back and grip me on the arm, saying, *For God's sake only step where I step or we'll lose our second laundry maid for the week.*

At the bottom she thumped open a door with her hip. Steam coughed out of the room and Mrs Pryce bowed her head, praying to the God of Steam. Even I had to dip my head on the way in, the doorway was that small.

The ceiling was high but you couldn't see how high because the steam gathered above our heads into clouds. It smelled like clean sheets and soap and all you could see were walls made of stacked, folded sheets reaching high up into the clouds.

*Where are we?* I asked Mrs Pryce.

*In the laundry, where do you think you silly girl.* She moved down one of the corridors made by the sheets. *Come along or you'll lose me!*

I had to run to catch up, and as I did my footfalls made the sheet corridors shake.

*Careful now, we don't want to have to re-fold all this, do we?*

She said *we* as if what she really meant to say was *you*.

No, I said. *We don't.*

We finally stopped in front of a table. On the left of the table was a mountain of crumpled sheets, so clean they were the bluish-white of icebergs.

*You will fold these, and when you've finished you will collect the dry sheets from the line and fold those.*

*Where is the—*

*You will find the line out there,* she said, and pointed out the window to where a line was strung up between the weathercock on the stable roof and the laundry. There were ten white sheets there, kicking around in the wind, trying to jump free of their pegs. Every now and then they kicked right up to reveal the stable behind them, and a boy leaning against the stable door.

Mrs Pryce's eyes grew darker and more shrivelled in her doughy white face.

*That's our coachman,* she said. On the next glimpse I could see that he was smoking a cigarette. *You'll find he doesn't often work, as the Lady of the House prefers to walk around the city. But even so, he gets paid twice what you will.*

*How much will I get paid?*

*Something in the order of a ha'penny a day, I'd imagine.*

She spoke quietly, almost tenderly, and I wondered if she was speaking to a distant memory of her younger self. She shook the memory out of her head and her lips became thin, her face tight.

*Well, it's been lovely chatting, but we mustn't let the Lady of the House know we've been larking around like this,* she said, and disappeared between the walls of sheets.

I watched the boy out the window for a moment. He was stubbing out his cigarette, stretching, yawning, then lighting another. He did it all so slowly, as if he was proving just how slowly he could go. Between a fluttering of sheets Mrs Pryce's lips mouthed *Chop chop, girl*, so I stopped looking at the boy and went back to the folding.

There were so many sheets. Smooth, white, clean-smelling and so, so boring. *Corner-to-corner, shake, fold. Corner-to-corner, shake, fold.* This was the rhythm of the folding of the sheets. It lulled you like a boat lulled you and once you were lulled you were on a ship. I could see Saint Eugenia climbing the rigging, looking back over her shoulder. But then the folding was done and the daydreams coughed under their thick coating of dust and were still again.

I went out into the courtyard to collect the dry washing off the line, and who should strike up a conversation with me but the slowest coach driver in the world.

*You're new,* he said, to prove how slow he was.

Yes, I said.

*You like horses?*

Yes.

*Can I take you for a ride?*

*Maybe he isn't so bad after all,* I thought, and followed him into the stable.

The stable was rich with the smell of sweet hay and leather. A horse was blowing air through his rubbery lips and restlessly moving the metal bit around in his mouth. It felt like Nonno Buti's stable in there, except for the boy's hand pinching me on the bum.

*What are you doing?* I asked him.

*Taking you for a ride,* he said. So I kicked him in the shins.

*What did you do that for, you crazy bitch?*

*Give me your shirt,* I said.

*What? No—*

*Do it,* I said, and kicked him again.

I lifted Nonna's bodybag skirt up, and took my knickers off. The folded rag was now soaked and warm and deep dark red.

*Here,* I said, throwing the rag at him. His chest and arms were smeared with blood. *Go and wash it in the laundry. I have more important work to do.*

The boy stumbled backwards and opened his mouth, ready to shout.

*And if you tell anyone about this,* I added, folding his shirt the way Nonna had showed me, *I'll tell them that's my blood on your skin, and you'll be locked up for the rest of your life.*

Once the boy was gone I stroked the horse down the nose and the horse looked deep into my eyes. *Yes, Tally Ho,* the horse said, *I'm bored of this place, too. Let's make it to the West Coast together.*

An escapee laundry maid astride a stolen horse was not going to make it to the West Coast unnoticed. I needed Joe's pants, needed food, too, and had to make my escape before anyone noticed the missing horse.

At the end of Coromandel Street I lashed the horse to a tree, and slunk through the shadows with my skirts bundled up in my arms so I could move without falling on my face. I'd hidden Joe's pants behind our lemon tree, under an old crayfish basket that had been left by the fence to rot, but just as I was slinking around the side of the house to fetch them I was stopped short by the sight of a man standing by our back door. Even in the dusk I could see he was wearing a bright yellow waistcoat with a gold chain connecting his lonely right pocket to his lonely left.

*Eccoti*, he said.

*Excuse me?*

*You're excused*, he said, and winked as if no one had ever made that joke before.

I watched him closely, and he watched me back. It was a competition between who would look away first, but I found myself walking towards him. He picked up my hand and kissed the back of it. His lips were two leeches searching for warmth.

*Nina*, he said. *I have heard so much about you. Good things, of course ...*

Inside, I could hear Mamma laugh too loud, then cough. I looked through the open back door to see dinner laid out on the table amongst freshly polished cutlery and roses in vases and finery I never knew we owned. Amongst it all sat Mamma, sipping from a glass of wine with her pinkie raised.

*What's wrong with your pinkie?* I asked her, but she did not hear me.

*Ciao bella!* she said warmly, as if I was not her estranged daughter who slept in a pumpkin patch.

*Mamma, what's the special occasion?* I was suspicious of the way her eyes were moving between me and the man in the doorway.

*I'll leave you two ladies to catch up, shall I?* the man said, before disappearing out into the garden.

I could smell a rat if ever I had smelled a rotting festering rat before.

*What are you plotting, Mamma?*

She looked younger than she'd ever looked as she wet her lips and said, *He is very handsome, don't you think, Eugenia?*

I supposed I agreed. He was tall and moved the way a thoroughbred moves, without ever having to think about it. His hair came up off his forehead as if it was falling back in a swoon. He was handsome, I would give him that, and when he came back from the garden he seemed too handsome, the house suddenly collapsible, as if it might faint at the sight of him.

*I trust that you found the facilities all right?* Mamma said.

*Facilities?* I asked her.

*Il bagno*, she whispered to me behind her hand, but he was already laughing at me for not knowing what facilities meant.

*I went behind a lemon tree*, he said. *Ho sentito dire che fa bene ai limoni.*

Mamma giggled and gave me a coy look that said, *Those men and their wee, they will do it anywhere if you don't keep an eye on them!* Maybe I would have laughed too, but all I could think about were Joe's trousers now steaming in piss.

Before he sat down the man picked his trouser legs up at the knee. He did other manly things too, like spread his legs slightly and lean forward so that his crotch pressed against the seat of his chair.

*This is Mr Innocente*, Mamma said, not looking away from the man. I felt sad for a moment, having never made her look so happy.

*Where's Papà and the others?* I asked Mamma.

*Out somewhere*, she said.

I can't remember what we ate or what we talked about, all I can remember is watching the way the man cut food without looking at his hands. I remember Mamma saying at one point, *Are you alright, Nina? You are quieter than normal.* I kept watching the man, and he occasionally shot me a dark look with sparks in it, the way the ocean sometimes has sparks in it at night. I remember at some point he said he owned a hotel in Auckland and had every intention of becoming rich. When he said *rich* it was hard not to believe he would. He was a man who walked through the world as if everything deserved to go right for him, and so everything probably would.

After dinner he stood and walked with me to the door. I watched him the whole way, wondering if I should be saying something or doing something but he kissed me on both cheeks and said, *I hope to catch you in a more talkative mood next time.*

Once the door clicked shut the rest of the family erupted out of the bedrooms shrieking and giggling. Ida clutched me by the arm and asked, *What is he like? Are you in love with him? Did he kiss you on the mouth?* but Mamma was answering all their questions before I could take in a breath to say one word.

When the other girls were fast asleep, Mamma brought her mending out to where I was sitting on the back step.



*Why don't you marry him?* She said. *He's a nice man for you. He will look after you.*

I shook my head. *No, Mamma. I can't.*

Mamma grunted out a sigh. She could not understand why a girl would waste an opportunity to have that handsome man stick his penis in her and move it around.

I'd had enough. *If you want him to marry, why don't you marry him yourself!* I said and Mamma nearly stitched her finger into the crotch of the trousers she was mending.

*Oh, Eugenia!* she said. *I should have brought Lisa to this wretched place instead.*

In pants reeking with Mr Innocente's piss I rode my new horse down to the water. I rode faster than any butcher boy ever had, and who should I find swinging his legs over the end of the Taranaki wharf but Harry Crawford. He had been drinking, I could tell by the wild swing of his legs and the half empty whisky bottle leaning against his thigh. Things hadn't gone right since they banned racing in the streets and now all that drive of his was left to loop back and give him liver disease.

*Can I have some of that?* I asked him. He handed me the whisky bottle and stifled a belch in the back of his throat.

*What brings you down here?* he asked.

I told him everything. I could marry a man with sparks in his eyes. We could ride horses together through the streets, but we probably wouldn't. I would have his children and never go outside except to church and my head would be filled with babies and churches and talk of other people's babies at church. Perhaps we would have fierce arguments and I would win him over to my way of seeing the world, but I couldn't imagine this happening either.

*Is he handsome?* Harry asked.

*Yes.*

*Is he clever?*

*Yes.*

*Is he good?*

*What do you mean by good?*

*Then fuck him,* Harry said. *Fuck those charming bastards.*

*That's the problem,* I said. *I can't think of anything worse.*

*Well,* Harry said, *I think you know what to do.*

I put my hand on his. *Will you come with me?* I asked him.

*I can't, kid,* Harry said, and we sat side by side in silence, swigging from the bottle and watching a party of drunk night bathers toe their way into Oriental Bay. We sat like this for some time until a rumble in the earth had both of us turn our heads. I wondered if an earthquake had struck, when a dust cloud followed by a herd of horses rushed towards the water. The horses of Wellington had broken out of their stables, and all they could think to do was make for the harbour. I didn't know they could swim, and by the looks of their horrified faces neither did they. They paddled around with their heads straining high, their eyes bulging out of their faces, thinking, *Where is the ground? How come our hooves aren't touching the ground?*

There were so many horses the party of bathers had to scamper out of the water, knees up. They stood shivering on their beach towels, looking helplessly back at the bay. *Good on you, horses*, I thought, *you deserve to go places they can't*. I looked over at Harry to say something, but he was not interested in the horses any more. He was walking towards where another man and his wife were saying horrible things to each other, things no other animal had a language for.

I recognised the woman. She was the woman with wild hair Harry had stopped racing for all those years ago. I wished she would turn around and see him standing there, saying nothing, loving her fiercely still.

We took the midnight ferry, me and the horse. The ferry was a steam ship, so big all the water in the harbour ran away from it screaming, revealing more water behind it, which also ran away screaming. The ship moved through the water like this for hours until the darkness and the terror had been drained from the sea and it was an exhausted reflection of the pale morning sky. I thought running away would be the brave thing to do, but didn't realise how frightened brave people must be all the time.

The other passengers were curled up asleep on the ferry seats in their work clothes, but my heart was going *ohmygodohmygodohmygod* in my ears so loud there was no chance of sleep, not for days. The horse and I stood frozen on the deck of the ferry looking out at the terrified water and let the wind slap us in the faces to remind us how un-asleep we were. The ship was moving me away from a place that didn't feel right no matter how hard I tried, towards a world that *had to* feel right, because if it didn't, what then? The West Coast of the South Island was a place so full of anger at itself it didn't know what to do other than rip trees out of the ground and pound them into the beaches on the back of big waves, or suddenly decide to make a man rich for no reason other than Why not? I would find gold there, or I would get eaten by a cannibal, or I would climb a mountain, or I would kill a man defending myself. Nothing else could happen to an angry person like me in an angry place like that. It would hate me and spit me out, or it would love me and spit bits of itself out for me to keep as gifts—there would be no in between.

We arrived in the Marlborough Sounds at an hour when no one was awake, not even night animals. The mist over the Sounds was clammy with the breath of dead saints that had escaped from the dank *drip drip* of mountain caves and the cold wooden floorboards of their convent dormitories to breathe the tides in and let them out again, and mutter curses high up in the canopies of kauri trees. With nothing else to do at that hour, they breathed the ferry towards Picton, and, as they did, crawled into the passengers' ears to explore the rooms and hallways of their souls, because hadn't they been duped into being on their own for long enough?

## CHILD COACHMAN ACHIEVES RECORD TIME DRIVING FOUR DANGEROUS HORSES DOWN WEST COAST

Hokitika, West Coast

At least one hundred thousand deceased saints have sighted a child coachman, not more than 15 years of age, successfully transport passengers from Picton to Hokitika in less than a week.

Despite the high speeds achieved by the coach as it traversed some of the most precarious terrain of the South Island, the passengers later proclaimed they had never before experienced such comfort while travelling. The child coachman performed many marvellous feats, at one moment fording a river without first plumbing its depths. The water allegedly covered the backs of the compliant horses, and seeped through the floorboards of the coach, however no speed was lost, nor doubts raised by the passengers as to their safety.

The child coachman's appearance was described as luminous, with delicate features belying his considerable strength and ability. As a token of his appreciation upon arrival at his destination, one Maori half-caste presented the coachman with the last remaining greenstone talisman from his ancestor's now-dormant quarry near Kumara.

Despite the near super-human time achieved by the child coachman, the saints insist they did not interfere. Once the coachman had arrived at Hokitika at one hour past midnight on the 13<sup>th</sup> instant, weary and in need of drink, two police officers placed the child coachman under arrest, on a charge of horse theft and vagrancy.

Afterlife Observer, September 14, 1891

The first thing I wanted to do when I got back was tell Nonno Buti about my adventure, but instead I had to be the policemen's hunting trophy for a whole afternoon. It was a wonder they didn't chop my head off and mount it on a plaque, they were that proud of themselves for having caught me. First they walked me through the Central Wellington Police Station with my hands cuffed behind my back and patted their proud stomachs as if it had been their stomachs that had smelled me out and caught me.

When The Lady of the House arrived they thought she would rip me to shreds but instead she pinched me on the cheek and whispered, *I like a girl with a bit of pluck*. She walked back to where the police officers were still patting their stomachs and said in her loudest acting voice, *Now never steal my horse again young lady, do you hear?*

Home would be different.

*WHAT TIME DID YOU MAKE?* Nonno Buti asked me on the way home from the police station. He was up in the driver's seat with the reins in one hand, holding something under a hat on his knee with the other.

*Made it in under a week!* I said.

Nonno Buti whistled though his dentures and his leg started jiggling. *I KNEW YOU COULD DO IT!* he said. *HERE, I MADE THIS FOR YOU.*

He took the hat off his knee and revealed a wooden horse with wheels for feet. It was still rough and had not been glazed or sanded. I was too old for such a toy but didn't say so because I could see he was happy to have made it for me.

*PULL ITS REINS IN,* he said.

I pulled its reins and the wooden horse's mouth and belly opened. Inside there was something yellow and shiny, like pus-infected organs.

*What is it?* I asked him.

*PULL IT OUT, GO ON,* he said.

It was a jockey's silk racing cap!

*WHAT DO YOU THINK?* Nonno Buti said. His eyes were all questions and exclamation marks, but my stomach dropped. My West Coast assignment had been a test. He wanted me to race for him. He wanted me to make him money.

*But I'm a girl, Nonno,* I said.

*WE COULD BE RICH!* He shouted down Adelaide Road, but the way he said *rich* was the way a child wearing a tea towel as a turban says *rich*. He was too excited. I did not believe him.

*No, Nonno. They won't let me race, I'm a girl. They have doctors to check.*

*BALLE!* He said. I didn't know what he thought was *balle*—the fact that I couldn't race or the fact that I was a girl. *WE WILL SHOW THEM!* he said.

I was starting to wonder about Nonno Buti. Maybe all his belief in my ability to make it to the West Coast had been the deluded ravings of an old man. But then I *had* made it there, so maybe all brave things need a delusion to get started.

I put the silk racing cap on as we pulled up outside my front gate.

Mamma and Papà and I stood at three points of a triangle in the kitchen, with my brother and sisters standing at the points of a bigger more complicated shape around us. Their arms were by their sides and their mouths were open, ready to catch drops of spraying blood. They were at a bear fight and I was the bear but nothing happened for a long time. When no one could handle the suspense much longer Mamma said very softly, *Dove cazzo sei stata?* Mr Innocente entered the room, and took Mamma's elbow with a sympathetic look on his face. He had a great catalogue of looks for his face and knew which one would work on which person at any given moment. He knew you had to give people what they needed to help them love you—and right now what Mamma needed was a kiss on each cheek and to be told she was right to feel sorrow, so he rubbed her back and said, *Non ti preoccupare, I enjoy a challenge.*

*Good, she is too much for me,* Mamma said, and started to sob. Even from the other side of the room I could see that her cheeks were dry. She was beating Mr Innocente at his own game and he didn't even know she was playing.

Papà walked slowly towards me and gripped me by the top of the arm.

*Eugenia, he said, running away will not help. If you do not marry him, we will send you to the girl's home. You cannot keep living here, you will give your mother a brain fever, and Mamma looked at me and winced to show how horrible that would be.*

The girl's home was hidden behind a medieval fortress on Cuba Street. No one knew what happened behind its high walls, but wild girls went in and came out dead-eyed, singing hymns about shepherds. It was the most terrifying place a girl could go, but I couldn't marry Mr Innocente, and I told Papà so.

Papà's grip tightened and my right side lifted off the floor. He was all muscle and gristle; I didn't know he was that strong. He shook me then. I could feel my brain rattle in my skull, his nails pierce my skin, but the shaking I could take. It was the look he gave me I couldn't bear.

In that one look I saw how he hated all the different parts of me, especially the parts I couldn't help being. What he hated in me was what he hated in himself, and I couldn't help that, I couldn't change that even if I tried.

He shook me for a long while. Some of the older babies were crying and saying, *No, Papà!* but Mamma ushered them down the hall to their bedroom.

When Papà let me go the tips of his fingers were white like the fingertips of a frog. He must have noticed this too because he looked at his hands and said, *I am an animal.*

I thought, *No, Papà, you're not as good as that.*

I sat on the kitchen table staring at the window. It reflected me back as a crinkly creature, the kind that lives in a rock pool and I thought, *That is where I should be, at the bottom of the sea.*

The hours began to drag and melt. I had no idea what time it was when footsteps padded down the hallway. I turned to look and there was Ida, standing in the doorway in a nightie that was once mine. It was so small it only came to her knees and her budding breasts made the buttons down the front strain against their holes. I turned back to face the window because I didn't want her to see the tear stains on my cheeks, but I didn't have the heart to tell her to go.

She sat on the table next to me, put her arms around me and squeezed. She had her head resting right where Papà had gripped my arm but I didn't tell her to move because it's a wonderful feeling, having someone squeeze all the hateful bits out of you until all that's left is good.

The rain finally broke in relief and Ida squeezed until the rain stopped, and the whirr of tiny frogs offered their voices up in the absence of rain.

*Where did you go when you ran away?* Ida asked.

*The West Coast,* I said, *and I have this to show for it.*

I reached into my pocket to pull out a greenstone a Māori had given me, but it was not there.

Ida pulled my hair out from under my silk racing cap, and combed out the knots with her fingers. It was a strange feeling, letting her be tender like this, because usually she was one of Mamma's spies, recording everything I said to use against me later.

She did my hair up the way she'd seen ladies have it done in the salons along Lambton Quay and walked me over to the kitchen window. There, looking back at me was not a sea creature, but a young woman I did not recognise.

*See, Nina? You are beautiful. You are more beautiful than any of us.*

The thought made my stomach turn, but it was late, and in the morning it would seem like we hadn't been tender with each other at all.

Mr Innocente came to my pumpkin patch in the night, took off my nightgown and my bloomers then ran his hands over my skin, saying, *Don't pretend you don't want this. Don't pretend you are not dreaming about this right now.*

He thrust his hips into mine and grunted each time he thrust until he shuddered as if he was being electrocuted. Then he rolled off.

I was stinging down there and sat up to see that my vagina was black. There were sparks coming out of it, like the ocean when it is disturbed at night.

There were two sparks coming from the house, too. They were Papà's eyes, watching.

I dreamed that I had a penis—I could feel it, all the nerve endings and everything, and he had nothing but a hole, a black hole.

All that week, voices were heard through walls. Papà in a rage at Mr Innocente, saying, *She is no good to us, she is ruined, you have to take her now!*

We were married at a registry. Mamma gave Mr Innocente a case of last year's passata as a dowry. Or a bribe. Or a curse.

And on the train to Auckland, words streamed out of Mr Innocente's mouth and the carriage filled with coal soot.

I dreamed and when I woke, it was to the sound of a woman calling out from the other side of a door. *Apri la porta, Brasseli, so che ci sei dentro!*

*Who is that?* I said.

Mr Innocente froze in the sheets.

*Who is that?* I said again.

*This is what I was explaining to you on the train,* he said.

The woman screamed, *APRI LA PORTA, STRONZO BIGAMO!*

When I opened the door a woman I recognised, with black hair turning grey in places, slapped me across the face so hard I dropped the sheet I was holding around my naked body. She saw everything: my breasts, the gap between my legs. The stickiness on my thighs.

When I came to, the woman was rubbing a tincture under my nose. I tried to sit up and move away, but she held me back down.

*Shhh,* she said. *I don't blame you.*

*What's happened?* I asked her, lying in her arms. I was comfortable there. *What's happened?* I asked again, closing my eyes.

*I am his wife. I am your husband's wife,* she said. I opened my eyes with a start. Of course, that's where I had seen her before. She was a vision I'd had of myself, married and worn out with nothing in my head but everything I had lost.

My feet carried me over hills and through the back streets of towns. They pulled my legs through a pair of trousers I found somewhere, I don't know where. They walked me until my hair grew so long it fell out, and a new crop of hair grew back, short as a boy's. They carried me to a house that looked like mine with a shrine to boats out the back rising up from a ground covered in broad leaves and heavy, swollen balls. *You would think it was a garden growing the heads of demented babies if you didn't know better*, I thought, as I fell down amongst them.

The night sky was a mess of twinkles, there were too many, I didn't know how the sailors saw any sense in them. I tried though. I took a deep breath and held my fingers up to make a window. I squinted my eyes and moved the window around until the stars clicked into place and there she was: Saint Eugenia herself in a pair of trousers, looking right at me.

*Are you going to give me some advice?* I asked.

*What can I say?* she said. *You're a disgrace to our name.*

*What?* I said. *But you're in trousers too!*

*And look where it got me. Dead.*

I rolled away from her, towards the pumpkin at my side. Saint Eugenia faded into the morning light, thank God, but Mamma was there instead, standing in a nightshirt with two new babies on her hips and her hair falling over their faces. There was too much hair and too much Mamma, she was everywhere I wasn't and surveying the garden as if I wasn't there. She walked back into the kitchen and shouted, *Ida, there's a good-sized pumpkin out here, bring the knife.*

She didn't know me any more. She didn't know the difference between her own daughter and a squash.

Why had I come back to this place? Perhaps I'd been hoping to see Ida again, perhaps I'd thought she might pull me close to her, and we'd sit together, not as sisters, as friends, but looking at her standing at the back door with a knife in her hand and her eyes redder than a crow's, I thought, *It's time to leave now, Tally Ho, and never come back.*



With nowhere else to go I went to the brickworks, only it was not a brickworks anymore, but a manufactory that made drains. I wondered if I was at the right place, but the same men were there, crawling around as if looking for their lost eyes.

There was a man standing with his hands on his hips, ciggie in mouth, smoke pouring out of his nose as if the insides of his head were on fire and he was standing patiently, letting them burn. He stared into the clay pit, stared at his watch, stared up at the sun as it adventured up into the sky and then turned to stare at me. He smiled in a way that said *You again*, and I smiled in a way that said *I don't know what you're talking about. Please give me a job.*

We worked hard and it felt good, putting our bodies to use like that. Some of the men took off their shirts and the sun turned their backs as brown as the clay, but I left mine on even when it was soaked through with sweat.

I could have made pipes forever. It was a simple process and everyone knew their role and how to play it. The rest of the world was a dark and unfathomable place in which people put on brave faces and pretended to know how to get by.

When the sun started the slow fall out of the sky the other men worked faster, hoping to draw home time closer. I worked more slowly, hoping to push it away, but the slower I worked the faster the end of the day arrived. It didn't make sense. As the other men streamed out the manufactory gates, the man with the opera eyes passed me a towel and bucket of soapy water to wash myself down.

*Are you alright?* he asked.

*Yes, I'm fine*, I lied. I didn't know where I would sleep.

*You coming with us to the pub or what?* he asked, and it was a question I would never forget. *You coming with us to the pub or what?* as if there was no doubt in his head as to whether I was a girl or a boy or a fish or a turnip. I was a man, and I was invited to the pub, where men went.

At the pub the drainpipe men taught me everything they knew. All their jokes, and what to say when, and whose chair to kick out from under who. To Darkie we said, *If you go outside at night don't close your eyes or we'll lose you!* and to the chows that stumbled in from Haining Street we pulled back the skin next to our eyes and said *Ching chong Chinaman!* which wasn't as good but we laughed as if it was.

The beer was a song and we sang it loud and proud in the streets of Wellington. It made us brave enough to show the world how much we loved it. We wanted everyone to love the world as much as us. We wanted the spinster Mrs Cockrain in her bonnet and black cape to come out in the streets and dance. We wanted her to see how funny her name was, and laugh with us. We threw stones at her house trying to get the walls to fall flat on the ground, *bam bam bam*, and leave her standing there in her cape. But she never did come out, because she was a bitter old spinster and our song was racing towards the chorus, so we left. We went to find the dancing bear on Garrett Street and we danced with the bear. It was on a chain and it was tired but it still eyed our delicious hands and jugulars, so two of us held the bear's head back and one of us held its jaws open by the teeth and another poured three pints straight

down its wide red throat. It danced again, a slow syrupy dance, and made the chain around its ankle sound like a tambourine played at the bottom of the sea. We walked down Haining Street breathing in the opium smoke that leaked from the boarded up windows and let visions hover in front of us like an empty suit of clothes held up by fairies. We said, *Oh thank you fairies thank you very much* and stepped into those visions. We could not tell the difference anymore between a punch in the face and a hug that went wrong. We became a pack of puppies jumping over each other in the middle of the street because they were *our* streets, we owned them and we were afraid of nothing. Eventually we found ourselves in beds at night or on floors that belonged to one or another of us and in the morning someone's wife or sister or mother gave us porridge or bread and kicked us out the door when we needed to be on the road to the drainpipe manufactory again. Until Friday arrived, it was the best week of my life.

It must have been a Friday because the lads were outside with their hands clutched tightly around envelopes full of money. They were clustered around one man reading from a newspaper.

*... in a drunken row which occurred in a house off Cuba Street, about one o'clock this morning, a man named Harry Crawford, a stevedore, lost his life ...*

*What?* I pushed myself to the front of the crowd. *What!?!*

He read on: *Some persons walking down Cuba Street, about that hour, state that they heard a woman crying "Murder." They followed her to the house of William George Raines, a stevedore, where on a verandah at the back they found Crawford lying dead, with a large bruise on his forehead ... Detective Campbell after making investigations, arrested Raines shortly before ten o'clock on a charge of wilful murder which will in all probability be resolved in a charge of manslaughter. Raines, who did not appear to have completely recovered from his drinking bout, was brought up at the Police Court this morning, and formally remanded ... Crawford had been in ill-health for some time past, and was brought up on a charge of lunacy a short time ago ...*

The men stared at their shuffling feet. No one knew what to say. All sound and the air itself was suddenly extracted from the world, and with that all the possible conversations I hadn't yet had with Harry collapsed into one dead soundless nothing. It was the first time I realised we wouldn't last forever; that everything wouldn't work out in the end, unless someone made sure that it did.

*You know what I think*, the man with the sad eyes said. *I think we should go to the Opera House, what do you boys reckon?*

We shrugged, shifted our weight from foot to foot. Opera had to be the last thing we felt like watching.

*Boys*, he said, *Lena's tits will make you feel better, I promise.*

Going to the opera house meant standing in a queue for tickets then standing in a queue for whisky then standing in a queue for ice-cream. I tried not to think about Harry sprawled

across Raines's floor, with a bruise blooming on his temple. He would never die like that, I refused to believe he was even dead at all.

Once we were eventually armed with our whiskys and ice-creams we took the stairs by threes up into the Gods. The Gods was a place near the ceiling filled with people like us, offering food and drink at the altars of their stomachs. We elbowed our way to the front, so close to the stage we could almost reach out and rip the blue velvet curtain off its castors. We tried this of course, but it didn't work.

When a man's voice announced that a Miss Lena Salette would sing us a song the men around me stood up and called out *Kiss me darlin!* before she had even walked out on stage; they were that sure she would be beautiful. It turned out she was a woman like any other and sang a song that any other woman could have sung, but the crowd cheered. Ladies in feathers shuffled across the stage. One of them tripped, but no one seemed to mind. A fat man and a thin man poked each other and joked. Behind their stiff smiles their brains worked hard at remembering their lines.

Two whiskys in and I began to understand. The thrill of the opera house was not what was happening on stage, it was being in the house itself. It was us, here, watching. Three whiskys in and it was announced that none other than Harry Crawford of New York, Ethiopian song and dance artist and legmania champion of the world, would now perform.

I turned to the man next to me.

*Did he say Harry Crawford?* I asked, but the man could not hear me over the roar of the crowd.

The man they called Harry Crawford walked out on stage with his shoulders back and his face turned out to the audience. His face was covered in black grease paint and his legs did things I'd never seen legs do. They could wrap around each other as if they were made of rubber. They could fly up and kick the man they belonged to in the face. Harry had not died—he had changed into this all-singing all-dancing octopus masquerading as a white man masquerading as a black man. He had left this dull place for the world of other people's dreams. I looked around me and saw men laugh. Their drinks spilled, and their ice-cream dribbled down their fronts but they didn't care. All that mattered was that someone had let the God in them loose, to laugh in another man's face.

Outside the opera house I was shaking with my new discovery. The seagulls were shaking with it, even the drunk men on the streets were shaking and it was with fear. They knew that God was not up there, far away. Broken pieces of Him were inside their hearts, and inside the hearts of everyone else, too. When those pieces came close together God was released as one resounding chant, usually at the cricket. It was a depressing thought, that cricket chants were the best the God in us could come up with, and so men drank, to forget that God was not as wonderful as they had hoped.

Outside the opera house bits of God called out to other bits of God. The bits had different names, but they were all the same underneath.

*Jack, hey Jack.*

*Harry, oi Harry!*

*Nina! Nina!*

I turned around.

A swan lady was standing in front of me with her white hat tilted slightly over her eyes. When she looked up the smell of Wellington cakes rushed towards me—coconut and chocolate and cream.

*Nina? Nina! It's me, she said.*

I tried to look across the street as if I hadn't seen her.

*Don't you remember me?*

The men around us stopped talking. I was growing breasts and hips and eyelashes right in front of their eyes.

*Sorry, who? I asked.*

*Amelia, Amelia Grey! We played on your grandfather's rocking horse together when we were girls, remember? What was its name? Jerry-Moe?*

*Oh yes, my mouth said. Geronimo. How could I forget?*

*I knew it was you under those boy's clothes. What a laugh! Were you performing tonight?*

The drainpipe men did not know what to say. Their eyes lingered around my chest trying to see through my shirt. One boy leaned in and asked what the others did not have the guts to say.

*Hey Nina, can I have a feel of your tits?*

What woke me up was a knock on the door. Then footsteps. The *cluck cluck* of concerned women talking in hushed voices. Gasping, then agreeing, then clucking. I was on a floor that could have been any of the drainpipe men's floors. My shirt was open and my right breast hung out loose for anyone to see. I tried to remember all the seconds that had passed between my third whisky and waking up here, but my memory of the night was one nauseous wave surging towards the acid-bright morning.

I was tucking my breast back into my shirt when a woman bent over me with the sun radiating out from behind her head. She looked straight into my eye as if I was a puppy with a brick around its neck, and she had come to drop me in a horse trough.

*Excuse me ... mister, er ... miss ...* She didn't know what to call a man who had suddenly turned into a woman, and quite frankly neither did I. *There is someone here from the army to see you.*

*The army?* I could see this woman was as worried as I was, so I let her walk me to the door, watching me the whole way there in case I turn into something else. A rabbit, perhaps. Or a dog.

In the doorway stood a steamship of a woman in a uniform. It was not a police uniform and it was not a hospital uniform—it was something that was trying to be all these things and more. She was bigger than most men, and could probably king hit one with her thumb.

*What is your name, dear?* the woman asked.

*I don't know, I said. Does it matter?*

---

The woman raised her eyebrows and shook her head at the sight of such a poor unknowing wretch.

*You are a woman though, are you not?*

Sometimes, I said.

Behind her eyes thoughts were turning over, *clunk clunk clunk*: *Clearly her time on the streets has put her under great distress; she doesn't know her own name and she cannot even tell me if she's a woman or a man.*

*Come here, child*, she said, pulling me into a hug that was all elbows and epaulets in the eye. *Come with me, you cannot be forced to live like this any more.*

She was right. My men, the drainpipe men, would never drink with me again.

Captain Gunnion led me to a fortress on Cuba Street. She called it a house, or the Pauline Home, but it was a fortress.

*Let's have a cup of tea,* she said, unlocking the six locks on the front gate. *And you can get everything off your chest.*

Behind the gate was a garden, if you could call it that. It consisted of plants growing in the shape of cubes. Women in uniforms walked past the cube plants with young girls who looked like they'd had their brains extracted. A nervous sound came from their mouths, and even the house at the end of the path made a shrill sound, as if its walls were lined with cicadas. In a distant room someone was practicing a tuba. The notes drew a square in the sky, *bom, bom, bom, bom*, over and over until a piece of sky nearly fell out and shattered at my feet.

Captain Gunnion did not smell like onions. She smelled like soap—and not the flowery kind, the kind that made a person clean without going in for any fancy business. She sat at one end of a large table, next to another woman with wide, jittery eyes. She was younger and her hands moved restlessly, never sure where God wanted them to be.

*Please, tell us your story from the beginning,* the restless woman said. She looked worried my story might make her sad, but a little excited by that too. *What this woman needs is to have a good cry,* I thought, *really let everything out,* so I didn't skimp on the melancholy, I went straight for it.

*Do you know the story of Cinderella?* I asked.

*Yes, of course,* she said.

*Well, that's not far from the truth.*



**ROMANCE IN REAL LIFE. A BIGAMOUS MARRIAGE. A WOMAN  
DISGUISES HERSELF AS A BOY.**

A representative of the New Zealand Times unearthed on Saturday a most extraordinary case, involving a bigamous marriage, the desertion of the victim, her plucky determination to obtain her own livelihood in a brickyard as a labourer, and her rescue from her uncongenial occupation by the Salvation Army. It appears that the girl, who is twenty-one years of age, is a native of Wellington, and resided up till nine months since with her parents in Wellington. According to her statement to the Salvation people, she led an unhappy life with her father and mother, and was relegated to the position of the family Cinderella. About nine months ago she met a specious scoundrel in Wellington, who took advantage of her innocence, and with him she went through a form of marriage. The newly-wedded couple immediately after the ceremony took their departure for Auckland, where, shortly afterwards, the unhappy bride ascertained that the man whom she believed was her husband was already married to another woman, and had by her a family. The poor girl at once, on ascertaining her lamentable position, left the fellow, and as speedily as she could returned to Wellington, where she vainly endeavoured to obtain employment, but, as she states, without acquainting her parents of her forlorn condition. In despair,

the poor girl says she obtained a suit of boy's clothes, and got her hair cropped, and after several attempts, obtained work in a drainpipe manufactory. The girl entered upon her duties and gave the greatest satisfaction. She was attentive, worked hard, and took her first week's wages, and on the same evening accompanied several of her yard mates to the Opera House. There she was seen by a friend of her family, who, being aware of her identity and her antecedents, acquainted the Salvation Army of the facts in connection with her sad case.

The captain in charge of the Pauline Home called at the girl's lodgings, and had little trouble in inducing her to enter the Home, pending her obtaining a situation more suitable and congenial to her sex than the one she was recently rescued from.

The Salvation Army people give the young woman an excellent character. They state she is modest in her demeanour and is in every sense of the term a good woman. The Salvation officer who supplied the particulars of this extraordinary case says the girl's appearance when she entered the Pauline Home would lead anyone to believe she was a good-looking lad of about 17 or 18 years of age.

Wanganui Chronicle, 24 July 1895

*Well I'm glad we found you before it was too late,* Captain Gunnion said.

*What would happen when it was too late?* I wondered, but did not ask.

*Deirdre!* Captain Gunnion said to the restless woman. *Show the girl her bed, and where she will be working.*

*Working?* I asked.

*Yes, working. This is not a hotel, young lady.*

Sergeant Deirdre led me up the stairs to a hall with walls that looked as if they'd been painted with splatters of left-over pea soup. Branching off the hallway were rooms the size of drill halls with high, barred windows at one end, and inside each room were rows of beds with sheets tucked so tightly into the bed frames you could see the stitching on the mattresses underneath. Deirdre pointed to a bed far out in the distance, a bed that looked like every other bed, and told me, proudly, that it would be mine.

*I think you'll be very happy here*, she said, and patted me on the hand. I was glad one of us thought so.

Sergeant Deidre let me put my things on the end of my bed, so that I'd be able to find it again in the sea of identical beds, and walked me down the hall towards the whirring sound I'd heard from outside. As we moved towards the door at the end of the hall I realised it was not the noise of cicadas, but metal machines with teeth. Deirdre opened the door to thirty sewing machines and behind them women and children bent down, carefully feeding the ravenous metal monsters.

*IT'S QUITE ENJOYABLE ONCE YOU GET THE HANG OF IT*, Deirdre shouted over the noise. *ALMOST LIKE YOU'RE FEEDING A VERY HUNGRY PET*, she said.

The women looked like husks of women. As they fed their hungry pets I could not shake the idea that they were unspooling from the inside and feeding them their own unravelled souls.

*WHAT ARE THEY MAKING?* I asked.

*WHATEVER NEEDS MAKING. OUR UNIFORMS, OR SHEETS FOR THE HOSPITAL, OR THINGS TO SELL.*

*SELL?*

*HOW ELSE TO YOU THINK WE CAN AFFORD TO LIVE IN THIS BEAUTIFUL HOUSE!* she yelled over the violent vibrations of floor and walls trying to shake the room free of this infestation of machines.

*SOMETIMES WE EVEN MAKE ENOUGH TO BUY A NEW SEWING MACHINE!*

A fine dusting of plaster fell from the ceiling, sprinkling Deirdre's hair, but she did not notice.

*IT'S GOOD TO KEEP THE GIRLS BUSY, YOU KNOW, GIVES THEM PURPOSE, KEEPS THEIR MIND OFF THINGS.*

*Keeps their mind off what?* I wondered. *How much happier they were before they'd been rescued?*

That night I lay on my bed wondering what my mother's life would have been like if she'd had a sewing machine. She would have had more time, but for what? To take in more sewing? To make more babies? Now that there were more machines in the world, the people in it galloped ahead with renewed purpose, but they were moving so fast they were likely to gallop off the edge of the earth. Where was our efficiency supposed to take us? To an early retirement sitting in an armchair, watching the seconds peel away from more seconds underneath?

As I lay there, the women from the sewing room filed into the room. Their pale heads at the top of their dark dresses looked like moons, floating around in search of a planet. Some of them had shaved heads. Some had peroxide blonde hair that was growing out. Some of them



were scratching their arms and the back of their necks, but all of them were looking down into the ground. Once they were in the room, they sat, as one, on the edge of their beds.

*I hate this place,* one woman moaned.

*Shut up,* another said. *This is what God wants for us, remember?*

She laughed. She kept laughing. The laugh turned into a sob.

*Learn how to play a tuba and you're saved from this,* a third woman said. *But you don't have a musical bone in your body, Martha, so tough luck for you, eh.*

*If you can play the tuba, you are saved from what?* I asked and forty eyes turned on me.

*Who are you?* Martha asked.

*I'm—*

*You're the one who goes round dressed as a bloke, aren't ya?* Now Martha was standing beside her bed with her clothes off. It was brave of her I supposed, but I couldn't look. I could never be that brave.

That night, in my dream, I was suddenly cold. Someone had made a cut on my head along the hairline, gripped the flap of skin and ripped down, peeling my face right off. Electrical cables were attached to my raw breasts, and someone was standing beside a giant machine, about to flick a switch. I woke to find my covers had been pulled off, and one of the girls, the one with the blonde hair, was climbing into my bed. I tried to speak, but she put her hand on my mouth.

*Shhh. This is what you like isn't it, love?* she said, rubbing her thumb over my nipple.

*Where did you get that idea?* I asked, but it felt good, like gold dust glimmering in ripples out across my chest.

*No fucking in the dorm!* one of the girls shouted out.

*Ah shuddup, Sandra, ya whiney bugger.*

*You woke me up, you bitch!*

The girl in my bed started suckling then, as if she were a child. Her face looked as calm as a child's. She had become a baby, and I was the Virgin Mary—and no more a virgin than Mary was, either.

I felt sick. These women are disturbed, I thought, and replaced my nipple with her own thumb, rolled her out of bed and carried her back to her own.

*I'm not a mother,* I whispered to her. *I can't be a mother. To you or anyone else.*

After a breakfast of watery porridge, Sergeant Deirdre walked me to the sewing room. I wondered if it was worth it, to spend my days bowed down to the ravenous sewing machines, feeding them cloth in exchange for a bed and watery porridge, but where else could I go? The drainpipe men would have told everyone what a joke I was by now.

Outside, the tuba was still cutting squares in the air, and a drum joined in, to keep its corners straight.

*Who's playing that?* I asked Sergeant Deirdre.

*Our girls in the band. They practice tirelessly, they practice so hard they have no time to enjoy their sewing with the other girls,* she said, shaking her head.

*And what would I have to do to join the band?*

*Well, you'd need to be able to play a musical instrument for a start, she said. Can you play?*

I stopped in the middle of the hallway. *Yes. Yes I can.*

She seemed surprised. *What can you play, dear?*

Anything you put in front of me.

She looked doubtful, then guilty for doubting. *Well, I'll speak to Captain Gunnion and see what she has to say.*

I stood at ease in the music room. Standing at ease, however, did not put a person at ease. It meant standing with your feet a hip's width apart, staring at the floor while Captain Gunnion paced backwards and forwards in front of you. She'd have been happier as the captain of a ship, or in the army leading a charge of horses to kill everyone in sight, but she was stuck as the captain of a spiritual army, which was more wafty than she was built for, but better than being a nun.

*Are you prepared to be a soldier of God and recruit the stray sinners on the streets to our cause?* Captain Gunnion asked. The way she asked, there was only one answer.

*Yes, Captain. I am prepared.*

*Well, show me what you can do.*

I made my way around the music room, trying my luck with the different instruments. The tuba seemed like it would be easy. All you were meant to do is put your lips to it and blow, but when I tried all that came out was the sound of an elephant getting its trunk stuck in a washing wringer.

*STOP!* she called out. *What are you doing? I thought you could play? Are you wasting my time?*

*No, Captain. I used to play in the Catholic church, but since they turned me out on the streets with nowhere to go ...*

My hand was shaking. I was afraid she would march me over to a sewing machine so ravenous it would stitch me into a cocoon and I'd only break out once I'd become a fully formed soldier of God. A sob caught in my throat. How did it come to this? How could I crawl out of this place? A tear rolled down my cheek and crashed onto the tiny metal cymbal of the tambourine at my feet.

*Stop crying and pick it up,* the Captain said. *I'll show you how to play.*

Out in the streets on Friday nights we sang *Why are you doubting and fearing?* Children bought ice-creams and came to watch, mostly to see who was at the girls' home now and who was prettier back when they were drunk and a whore.

We played on the street corners, we played outside the pubs. We sang *There's a sea for weary souls* to the sailors as they walked from the quay to Courtenay Place. Through a pub window I could see the drainpipe men laughing and pushing each other into bar stools. One squinted at me as if I was a ghost come to haunt him. I looked away, and tapped my tambourine harder.

We passed the bear on Garrett Street. It was drunk and stumbling. We played *There is a better world they say* to give him hope that he might make it back to a Russian pine forest. He roared at the noise we made and was poked with a stick by his master as punishment.

We played at the cricket pitches on the weekend and we played at the shops. We played to an old drunk in slippers who wore a Red Indian headdress and the hide of a sheep strapped to his back. We sang, *Sinner, see yon light!*

*What light?* he yelled back. *What bloody light? It's the middle of the night you fools!*

We sang, *We have each a cross to bear.*

*Bear? I'm no bear! I'm a fucking sheep! Baa! Baa!*

So we sang, *The lord is thy shepherd* and he passed out in a horse trough.

No one had the guts to shut God's soldiers up, so we played through nearly every suburb of Wellington, until there was only one left: Newtown.

On the day we were due to play in Newtown I tried to be ill, but Captain Gunnion did not believe me.

I held my breath and tried to faint, but it didn't work. They shook their heads and said, *O will you not yield to God tonight?*

*No!* I coughed. *I can't!*

*O lamb of God, thou wonderful sin bearer,* the trumpet player said.

*What are you saying? What are you talking about?*

They were circling now, their instruments pointed at me like guns.

*Come to the Saviour, come to the Saviour!*

*Dark is the way, sinner!*

*For our salvation, Jesus paid a wonderful price!*

*Ahhh!* I said. *I'll go! I'll go!*

The Captain chose a spot on the corner of Coromandel Street for us to play on, possibly because of the twelve kids standing on the opposite side of the road in the shadows. I could feel them staring at me as one many-armed creature waiting to pounce. But it didn't pounce. We sang about shepherds and we sang about sinners and I played the tambourine on every two and every four. The monster sat there in the dark, and breathed, and licked its twelve ice-creams, and listened.

*Though we are sinners every one,*

*Jesus died!*

*And though our crown of peace is gone,*

*Jesus died!*

*We may be cleansed from every stain,*

*We may be crowned with peace again,*

*And in that land of bliss may reign,*

*Jesus died! Amen.*

---

After we finished killing Jesus I told the rest of the band I'd meet them back at the Home. Captain Gunnion looked at me down the length of her nose.

*Are you sure?* she asked.

*Yes, Captain, God is with me. I will be fine.*

I walked along Coromandel Street until I found myself outside Amelia's house. Two lights flickered inside, turning the windows gold. I looked at my grey skirt and blouse and felt as drab as river stones with the gold blasted out. I could not go to her door like this.

I heard my house from four doors away—the shrieks and giggles of brats being chased around the living room, the call that it was time for bed, Ida's voice, a woman's voice now.

The garden was dark. The tomato vines in the front yard breathed their spiciness out into the night air, making my nose itch. There was no moon spying on me, no million eyes of stars, but I knew this garden well. I would be as invisible as one of Captain Gunnion's angels. So invisible I would not even exist. I tiptoed around the side of the house and as I did, stopped for a moment to look through the kitchen window. A woman was bent over a tub, washing dishes. She paused for a moment, and I slunk back into a shadow, but she'd only paused to push the hair out of her eyes with her wrist. She was fair, with red cheeks. Children clambered up onto the kitchen table behind her, leapt off, and clambered up again to throw spoons at other children on the floor. They were blonde, some of them. One of them had red hair. They were what my family would have been if they were Scottish or Irish or dropped in a vat of bleach. I had never seen them before in my life.

Behind the lemon tree, under a rotting crayfish net, Joe's trousers had become a slimy city for slaters and worms. When I pulled them on, a hundred cold feet tickled my legs. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, my life as a boy would rise from the grave. If my family could leave Eugenia for dead, then I could, too. For good this time, and with no regrets.

**HARRY CRAWFORD**

**TO ALL OUTSIDE APPEARANCES, AT LEAST**

# DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

## SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

### WAHROONGA/BALMAIN

**Annie Birkett:** Housekeeper at Dr Clarke's residence, also known as Daisy.

**Harry Birkett:** Son of Annie Birkett.

**Harry Crawford:** Scotsman, formerly of Wellington, New Zealand, Dr Clarke's general useful.

**Lily Nugent:** Sister of Annie Birkett, resident of Kogarah.

**George Robert Smith:** Lives around the corner from the Crawfords.

**Jane Wigg:** Resident at number seven The Avenue. Neighbour to the Crawfords.

### WOOLLOOMOOLOO

**Jack:** Boarder at 103 Cathedral Street.

**Henrietta Schieblich:** Landlady at 103 Cathedral Street.

**Eduard Schieblich:** Violin teacher and husband of Henrietta Schieblich.

### DRUMMOYNE

**Emma Belbin:** Friend of Lydia Parnell.

**Clara Bone:** Grocer on the corner of The Avenue. Married to Ernest Bone.

**Ernest Bone:** Grocer on the corner of The Avenue. Married to Clara Bone.

**Edith Hoyes:** Resident at number three The Avenue. Neighbour to the Crawfords.

**George Parnell:** Son of Lydia Parnell.

**Lydia Parnell:** Wife of Harry Crawford's colleague at Perdriau's Rubberworks. Friend and counsellor to Crawford.

### STANMORE

**Mrs Lizzie Crawford:** Second wife of Harry Crawford.

## THE NEW USEFUL

### SYDNEY, 1910–1913

#### HARRY BIRKETT

Wahroonga Public School was full of the sons of doctors and lawyers who grew up in dark houses under the enormous trees of Sydney's Upper North Shore. Harry Bell Birkett was only the son of a doctor's widowed housekeeper, did not own a boat or a chemistry set, and so was only interesting to the boys with allergies who liked to take him on as a charitable project. But Harry knew that when he got home he'd have the whole doctor's house to play in, as if it were his very own house, and the doctor would show him how to bowl a fast ball straight into the wicket, as if he were his very own son.

Somewhere out in the world real men were fighting real pirates or driving wild horses across mountains honeycombed with gold mines. In Wahroonga you were lucky if you ever heard the dog from next door bark. There were lots of trees to climb, and strange insects to watch battle their way through a wilderness of lawn, and yellow and black spiders the size of your hand to dismember in a torture ceremony for an audience of stink beetles, but Harry sometimes wished that the spiders were pirates and the gum trees were the masts of ships and the grass was an ocean filled with sea monsters. The world could have burned down to the ground and you would never know it in Wahroonga. You mightn't even smell it. You would only notice that the sky at sunset was a bit more red, and matched the curtains in a nice way.

Harry slept in the same room as his mother on a trundle bed at the foot of her own, but sometimes he would crawl up into her bed because she was very long and thin and he was only small, then, and warm—just like a hot water bottle she said—and those were his favourite nights.

Then they would lie awake talking. She would stroke back his hair and pull the thumb out of his mouth every time it found its way there, but she wouldn't reprimand him for it. She would tell him about all the possible futures they could have together once she'd saved enough money and they could leave.

"And what do you say about us owning a lolly shop?!" she would ask him and he would say, "Oh wow Mum, really?"

"Well, why not?" she would say, and then go on to describe all the different lollies they would have: chocolates with caramel centres and caramels with chocolate centres and li-

quorice in the shape of fish. Harry wanted to tell her they never needed to have this shop, that he would be happy to spend the rest of his life lying in his mother's bed imagining it, but he didn't, in case actually believing the lolly shop was going to happen was the only thing that made the dreaming of it possible.

One day in spring when Harry and his mother were sitting on the kitchen steps sharing a packet of humbugs, Harry saw that a man on horseback was watching them from further up the path near the stables. He tugged his mother's skirt and pointed at the man but his mother didn't seem to care.

"Yes Harry, that's the new useful. Shall we go and say hello?"

Harry didn't feel like sharing his mother with anyone that morning but did not have a good enough reason to say no, so he said yes.

The man was small with dark hair and a smooth face and the horse he was on top of let him sit on its back as if he were an important extension of the horse.

"What's your name?" Harry asked the man.

"Harry," the man said.

Harry thought the man was playing a joke but no one laughed.

"But that's my name," Harry said.

"Can I share it with you, squirt?" the man said with a wink.

Over the weeks that followed Harry couldn't work out what exactly made Harry the New Useful *useful*, but sometimes they called him a gardener and sometimes they called him a coachman, and sometimes he would take Harry the Squirt and his mother out for a ride on the doctor's dray, maybe to see the circus or go to a picnic on their day off down by the Lane Cove River.

Having two Harrys at the doctor's house was confusing, so sometimes Harry the younger was called "squirt" or "kid" or "boy", and sometimes Harry's mother was called Daisy even though her name was Annie, and Harry the New Useful was called Harry Leo Crawford but mostly just Crawford because it was hard to imagine him being called anything else. Except "father", which Harry the Squirt called him once by accident, and then blushed.

Crawford had a New Zealand accent with a bit of something else thrown in. He was from Scotland, but he could only remember that place when he had haggis for breakfast because he'd left when he was very small. Just like how Harry Birkett couldn't remember his real father except for when he held his fork in his fist the way his father used to, but then that was only because his mother pointed it out.

Once Crawford arrived at the doctor's house, he seemed to always be where the things people missed or wanted should have been. Harry's old father was never around because he was dead, but Crawford was always around. He was there to help Harry and his trunk onto the cart when they finally left the doctor's house for good. He helped Harry's mother put her boxes next to Harry's trunk and he waved as they moved off down the driveway. And after the



long ride down the highway to Balmain, there was Crawford again: holding the keys to the lolly shop Harry's mother had always wanted.

### LILY NUGENT

The gravel driveway of Dr Clarke's house was as long as a country road. Daffodils sprang up out of the lawns on either side in a semblance of carefree clusters. Grey trunks of blue gums disappeared into cloud above the house like the columns of an ancient Greek acropolis. Why did one man and his wife need to live in a house the size of a small ancient city? Didn't the huge halls (not rooms) make them feel tiny in comparison? Didn't God feel further away? Everything about the place made Lily feel crass. The salmon pink of her dress felt tinned, not fresh.

As she walked down the driveway, she could smell horses, then hear voices, then see the roof of a wooden shack peeping over the top of a hedge. This must be the coachman's quarters, Lily thought, and turned around to find another path. But she could hear the shrill laugh of a small boy, then her sister's laugh, followed by a gruff leathery voice calling out: "Daisy, come back!" She heard Annie's voice again, shouting: "No, Crawford, I can't, Lily will be here any second!"

Lily stopped in the driveway, saw a bare patch in the hedge and bent down to look. Through the tangle of twigs she saw her sister running with her skirts hiked up above her knees, and her nephew with a fistful of leaves in his hand sneaking up behind a short man with unusual spade-like hands. The man was pretending not to see the boy, then turning around and walking towards the boy with the exaggerated strides of a monster. The boy was delightedly terrified, threw the leaves in the man's face with a scream and ran back towards the house, chasing his mother. The small man swiped at the leaves in his face with his spade hands and moaned after them: "Daisy! Daisy!" He followed them, and Lily couldn't tell if he was exaggerating his steps or if he actually walked like that: like a man twice the size of himself.

"Who is Daisy?" Lily asked her sister, standing on the service door steps.

"Well hello to you too, dear sister!" Annie said, cheeks still flushed with rushing, a voice full of bubbles. She had grass on her shoulder, grass sticking out of her hair at all angles. She looked like an escapee from a pagan festival that had gotten a little too silly.

The short man came striding up the hill towards them with steps too big for his legs.

"Daisy!" he said to Annie in that leathery voice, "You forgot your hat!"

He handed her a hat with five fresh daisies woven around the band. Annie saw them, and tried not to smile.

"I said, *who is this 'Daisy'?*" Lily said again.

She did not like secrets, did not like thinking this man knew her sister better than she did herself, and she certainly did not like that such a place made her worry about the colour of her dress while Annie was rolling around in the hay.

"It's me, silly," Annie said. "I am Daisy. It's just a friendly name Mr Crawford has for me." She looked sideways at the small man and flushed again, until she looked dangerously sunburned.

Standing there, watching Mr Crawford ruffle the hair on her nephew's head, Lily realised that he must have been the Don Juan of her sister's letters. This was the man taking Annie and her son out in the doctor's dray to the circus on their days off; this was the poor man who couldn't read; the man who was a miracle with horses.

Lily felt suddenly ill. She wanted the doctor to walk in now, and sweep her sister off her feet. It had been known to happen. One in every hundred or so entitled, posh North Shore doctors had actually left their wives for their housekeepers or secretaries. She wished she had written that in her letters now. *Hold on dear sister, the doctor might marry you one day!*

What a father young Harry would have had then! What a school he would have gone to! What a waste.

### HARRY BIRKETT

The lolly shop looked exactly the way a lolly shop should look, except it was coated in a thick film of dust, as if it were buried in the memory of a dying old man. When the door blew shut the dust jumped off the jars as if the old man had coughed, and the jubes sang their colours out into the light before the dust settled over them once more.

The shop had been sold at great profit even though two boys robbed its previous owner on the stickiest day of summer. A police officer (with a real revolver) had chased the boys for half a mile only to be stopped in the street by heart palpitations and the sight of the fugitives inching across the harbour in a dinghy.

Harry and his mother were determined to revitalise the mood of the place. They ordered new blue balls of chewing gum, butterscotch, toffees in the shape of cushions, bulls-eyes, American fudge, peanut brittle, real ice-cream cones, soft drinks with bubbles, Toblerone from Switzerland and a brand-new honeycomb treat called a Violet Crumble which came in a purple box. Their lolly shop was going to be the lolly shop all the kids in Balmain had as their favourite.

But one morning the joy Harry had in their project suddenly evaporated. As Harry's mother was pulling the boiled lollies apart with her fingers so they looked a bit fresher, she paused for a moment and said, "Harry, how would you like it if Crawford came to live with us?"

She said it as if she were saying, "How would you like an ice-cream cone for breakfast?" But Harry wasn't fooled. He admired Crawford, but he did not trust him. There was something about Crawford that reminded Harry of the seaweed shadows that flickered beneath the waves at the beach; the ones you had to look at twice to make sure they weren't the shadows of sharks.

"He basically already does live with us."

"Yes, but if we got married—"

"Married!?"

"He could live here on a more permanent basis. What if he stayed the night, every night?"

"He already stays the night!"

Harry had seen Crawford step out of the shadows across the street with a bunch of flowers, or a brooch wrapped in tissue paper, or part of a pig carcass from the meatworks wrapped

in a bloody white cloth. He had seen his mother look over each shoulder, check for neighbours, and let Crawford in the shop, even after business hours.

“No, Harry, he stays until you’ve gone to bed and then comes back very early in the morning so it looks as if he stays the night, but he doesn’t stay the night properly—only married people can stay the night properly.”

There was no spit in Harry’s mouth any more. His body had gone into a state of shock, and had to conserve its energy in case he needed to run away very fast or punch his mother in the arm. His mother was lying to him about Crawford staying over. Maybe his mother lied about everything. Maybe she wasn’t his mother at all.

For a whole week Harry couldn’t talk to her. He would grab his breakfast from her, then eat it while hiding in the storage cupboard. In the dark, the jars of rainbow balls looked like eyeballs. Maybe his mother collected men’s eyeballs. Maybe his real father’s eyeballs were staring at him, warning him to leave. Maybe that’s why she liked it when men looked at her, because she was imagining what their eyes would look like in a glass jar hidden in the cupboard.

When they walked to school together Harry walked on the opposite side of the road. When she came to pick him up he would walk straight past her as if she wasn’t there. She was dead to Harry now. She looked like a ghost anyway, with her fair, almost see-through skin and blonde hair turning grey in places and long white skirts and white lace blouses that went right up to her chin. The worst thing was that Harry wouldn’t be allowed to crawl into her bed anymore because the other Harry would be there, smelling of blood and meat from the meatworks and turning his mother into a slut.

After a few days of Harry’s silent treatment there was a sadness that ran through his mother’s voice so that it sounded like velvet rubbed the wrong way. And after a week of being ignored and not speaking herself, all the words she could have said spilled out of her at such a rate her face became red from lack of oxygen.

“Now listen Harry, it’s very hard running a shop on your own especially as a woman and Mr Crawford has promised to help around the place, he might not be the same as your father but he can always get a good leg of mutton and sometimes even lamb and I am going to marry him whether you like it or not.” Then she jabbed her new greenstone pin into the high lace collar of her blouse so hard that she gave a little gasp and looked at Harry as if it was his fault, as if everything was his fault, and cried.

Harry’s mother did not often cry. The only other time he saw her cry was when she got the letter that said his father who no longer lived with them was dead, and even then Harry couldn’t be sure that the tear running down her cheek wasn’t sweat because it had been a hot day and she was wearing an awful lot of skirts.

Harry begrudgingly let his mother and Crawford marry on a hot February day in the Methodist church. He wore a sailor suit for the occasion, and felt as slimy inside it as a cold piece of corned beef left in the pot overnight. Aunt Lily was there with his two cousins who were not old enough to be fun or interesting, and so they spent the day hiding their faces in Aunt

Lily's skirts whenever he got too close, or staring at Crawford in his borrowed suit and high starched collar as if he were a monster that had walked right out of a picture show to gobble them up.

After the wedding there was no big party with tiers of cakes and sandwiches. The adults went back to the shop to drink too much alcohol and then walked Aunt Lily and her kids back to the railway because the trams were too full and the fresh air was supposed to do everyone good.

That night, Harry heard creaks and pants and giggles and "Oh fuck, Harry," through the thin walls. Hearing his mother call out his own name like that felt strange, even though he knew it wasn't meant for him. He wondered for a moment if he did wish she would scream like that for him, then shook the thought from his head and frowned himself to sleep.

### LILY NUGENT

Balmain in February was so humid the flies moved through the air like paddle steamers slowly sinking—rising and sinking—in a stagnant river. Outside, the gardens were limp and inside the Methodist church the minister's red face looked as if it were freshly basted in fat. Flies buzzed in and out of his mouth as he opened and shut it: dying, before being born again.

"DO NOT FORGET," the minister said, releasing three flies as he did, "IN THE WORDS OF JESUS CHRIST: VERY TRULY I TELL YOU, NO ONE CAN SEE THE KINGDOM OF GOD WITHOUT BEING *BORN AGAIN*."

The words resounded in the eaves of the empty church, shifting damp clumps of dust and lifting dozy pigeons out of their nests. The newly released flies flew up into the kingdom of God, which was now all around them, repeated, and repeated, and repeated.

Lily's little sister stood at the pulpit in a smart cream lace dress, but all Lily could see was how she flinched every now and then after being spat on by the minister's explosions of words.

"Why didn't you get married at the Anglican church?" Lily asked her sister after the service.

"There was too long a wait," Annie said. "And besides, Harry is a Scot, and you know how the Scots feel about anything from England."

Another set of eyes might have seen how Annie had grown taller under the minister's shower of spit. Those same eyes might have seen Annie and Harry as two strains of apple trees, flourishing together under the Holy irrigation spraying from the presiding minister's mouth: the greenstone pinned to Annie's left breast a new green shoot; the heart-shaped pendant hanging on a chain around Annie's neck a precious metal replica of her own full heart.

*On a chain around her neck*, Lily thought. How appropriate for a woman's heart to be chained around her neck on her wedding day.

Lily suspected the wedding meant more to her new brother-in-law than it did to her sister. He had never been married before. Lily knew her sister was no great beauty, but standing at the pulpit, her new husband looked like a donkey that had woken to find himself in the

arms of a fairy queen. He was blinking uncontrollably. His voice was gruffer than usual. He kept wiping his hands on his trousers and staring into her face as if it were a rare rainforest flower in the process of opening, yielding its midnight scent just for him.

### HARRY BIRKETT

Harry's voice broke the same morning the lolly shop coughed its last cough, rolled over, and died. When Aunt Lily turned up with the removalist and dray his mother leaned against the doorway of the dead shop like something wilted, and watched Crawford carry out the things worth keeping.

"Don't worry, Mum—" Harry started to say, but when he said "Mum" his voice jumped as if he were about to hiccup or cry. He wasn't about to cry, though. The adult in him was simply forcing itself through his boy body like Houdini bursting out of chains in a cage under the sea.

Aunt Lily was supervising the move and doing her best impersonation of a sugar bowl, with two hands on her hips, saying "Good boy, Harry" every time he picked up a box. He wanted to say, "I'm not a boy anymore, Lily, I'm a man now," but he didn't in case she laughed at his voice see-sawing between boyhood and manhood and pinched him on the cheek.

Tomorrow he would wake up in Aunt Lily's house and he would be a man with a man's voice. He would open his mouth to speak and deep tones would rumble through the house, shaking its foundations, demanding respect, and Crawford would not be there to stop him from finally being the man of the house he was supposed to be.

"I have no problem with you coming to stay until you find somewhere else, Annie, but I do have a problem with that gruff husband of yours and his girl, always lurking in corners like funnel-web spiders," Aunt Lily's voice had said to Harry's mother down the post office telephone, loud enough for Harry to hear it through the telephone booth wall.

"His girl" was a dark fifteen-year-old who called herself Crawford's daughter. Her mother had died of consumption, she said, but this was the first any of them had heard about another woman. Crawford's girl was never really talked to or explained, and ever since she surprised them on the doorstep one night with the knowledge of her existence and a large, pregnant belly, Harry's mother looked permanently wan; her corsets were always too tight. The girl came to live with them whenever it suited her, then moved on once she'd eaten all their food and left a pile of dirty washing on the laundry floor. When it was time to sell up and move, Crawford's girl was, of course, nowhere to be seen.

Even though Crawford was short for a man, he was strong. Harry carted as many of the boxes to the dray as he could, but Crawford carried more. Aunt Lily was the shortest and the smallest of them all but she was also the scariest, like a terrier in a family of Labradors. She had a way of raising her eyebrows that could make a person say sorry without knowing why and especially liked to do this to Crawford because she knew that if he and his trail of illegitimate children hadn't been lurking around, the shop would have been fine, just fine.

“How can it be,” Aunt Lily asked Crawford as she scrubbed the walls of the shop so hard the paint came off on the sponge, “how can it be that there are hundreds of children in Balmain and yet this fine lolly shop—a children’s paradise—is a deserted wasteland? How can that be? Someone must have scared them off, Crawford, someone must have scared them off.”

“Sorry Lily,” Crawford said, because she had raised her eyebrows.

After all the furniture had been tied down to the dray Harry sat with his mother on the curb, holding her round the shoulders, and she looked up at the sky, waiting for it to fall. Crawford leant on the dray with a cigarette hanging out one side of his mouth, while Aunt Lily walked through the shop to do a final check. There, on the empty counter, she found a kidney-shaped greenstone glinting like a sugared mint leaf. She picked it up between two gloved fingers, walked it outside and dropped it in Harry’s mother’s open palm.

“What’s this?”

“Oh, Crawford gave me that,” Harry’s mother said, as if he wasn’t there to hear it. “He was given it by a Māori when he rode horses up and down the West Coast of New Zealand.”

Who would have thought that the man skulking under the brim of his hat had driven horses up and down the wild West Coast of New Zealand?! He was a real man, then. The kind of man Harry always wished his own father had been.

In that moment, Crawford grew an inch, right before Harry’s eyes.

---

# THE NEIGHBOUR

## DRUMMOYNE, 1915–1917

CLARA ANNIE BONE

Clara Bone the grocer's wife sat by the upstairs window studying Lyons Road below. Her cat, Prudence, prowled around her ankles. Ordinarily she would kick Prudence aside for being such a nuisance, but this Sunday she welcomed the feeling of an animal between her legs. It kept the wildness of her grief company, so she could sit back from it for once, and watch.

During the week customers had flicked their eyes between the prices on the blocks of butter and her composed face, as if she had personally been responsible for the war, and the inflated cost of shipping, and the strike. Of course none of it was her fault, and she had to get by like everybody else. She had already made the supreme sacrifice by allowing her son to fight, and every day she regretted it, so she wasn't about to feel guilty about her profit margins or her new holiday cottage by the sea. The sea was a mindless thing, but it was a grand thing, too: deeper and more agile than the mind and the war and the thought of her son's body getting blown apart. Mr Bone had his garden. Well, she would have her trips to the sea.

The street, stark under its electric lights, was quieter on Sunday nights, and ran out in the direction of a sea she could only visit sometimes. She was tied to Drummoyne, but she supposed there were worse things to be tied to. Parachutes, for instance, falling out of planes.

From her window she could see a couple, new to the area, walk down the brightly lit road and turn into The Avenue. They walked arm-in-arm, a perfect specimen of young lovers—but closer inspection revealed irregularities. The woman was a great deal taller than the man, and thin to the point of being skinny. She looked as if she had fallen out of the world of ladies and lace and somehow found herself here, in this suburb of dressed-up workers' cottages. The man walked with a swing in his arm, a stride that over-shot the distance of a step and seemed to be holding something back behind the lips. Following the couple was a boy, slightly younger than her son would be now. And—was that a shadow, or a dark girl? A maid, perhaps? Mrs Bone pressed her nose up against the glass, but the scene flickered to black.

Another fuse blown in the street lamps. Mrs Bone shook her head. Electric lights. She knew they would never last.

## EDITH HOYES

Mrs Hoyes never troubled much about the neighbours. Even when the Crawfords, who had only been in the area for about a year, moved from their brick home at number seven The Avenue (two doors down from her house) to the weatherboard house at number five The Avenue (right next door to her house) she presumed they had been having financial difficulties. She did not trouble any more about it.

Lots of people were having financial difficulties. Mr Hoyes had read to her about it, from the paper. Men right across Sydney had stopped working to prove they could not be replaced by machines, and now, if Sydney were the back of a dog's neck, its hairs were raised.

Despite the prickly atmosphere, Drummoyne felt to Mrs Hoyes as snug and close knit as a sock. When you worked, you were never far from home, and when you were at home, you were never far from the eyes of your employers, watching from their verandahs on the high side of Lyons Road.

Mrs Hoyes had lived in the area when wooden shacks that used to pass for houses jutted out over the footpaths and the lack of street lights west of Byrne Avenue turned Five Dock and beyond into a black void, smelling of Gypsy camps and fox piss. Mr Hoyes had read to her that almost four thousand people had rushed to live in Drummoyne's brand new brick bungalows since then, and Mrs Hoyes found it easy to believe him. With new houses came new neighbours, and with new neighbours came more natter. At forty-five, she did not consider herself old, but she was old enough to have seen how quickly a place like Drummoyne could change, and how—even more quickly—the neighbours' chatter could shift direction like a flock of fickle parrots in the breeze.

No, she did not trouble much about the neighbours, but she thought it such a shame for the Crawfords to have made their financial situation so visibly known to the street by moving from number seven to number five. By doing so, hadn't they asked to be the centre of so much attention?

## JANE WIGG

As the cart laden high with Mr and Mrs Wigg's furniture creaked down The Avenue towards number seven, the more established neighbours stood watching on their front verandahs. Later, they would come around and be too friendly with too-sweet cakes or biscuits with not enough sultanas in them, and offer up smiles that said, *Talk to me first, so I can tell the others.*

The nosier the neighbours were, the more Mr Wigg retreated into his encyclopedias and machine manuals, but Mrs Wigg knew that the thing to do was get involved in the community: join the eisteddfod committee or knit socks for the Australian Comforts Fund. At heart, Mrs Wigg was a shy creature, happy to watch the world knit and fundraise and adjudicate from behind the glass of her dining room window. Other people seemed so much more competent than her. Take the Crawfords next door. Mrs Wigg was convinced the Crawfords existed solely as a point of comparison for her own marriage. They had lived in her house,



moved through its rooms according to their own patterns, and from the first moment she stepped foot in her empty bedroom she found herself wondering what secrets its curtains had been closed to keep.

### CLARA ANNIE BONE

The Crawfords' boy was intelligent, Clara could see that much. He knew exactly how to tessellate his mother's groceries so that they fit perfectly in the wooden crate. She was so impressed with the boy's natural gift for packing, she could not help putting her hand on his shoulder and calling him "Rabbit", as she used to call her own son.

"You better be careful, Rabbit, or I might give you a job, and not let you leave," she said, then gave him a gumball on the house.

The idea of a job made the boy stand up straight as a soldier.

"Hear that? A job, Harry!" his mother said, patting him on the head. He pulled away, and ruffled his hair so that he stood apart from her: his own, motherless man.

"That would be excellent," his mother said to Clara, even though Clara was not talking to *her*, she was not doing this for *her*.

Clara could not help but have ham sandwiches ready when the boy came to help the following afternoon. And a little raspberry cordial. And a freckle, for after the sandwiches. She gave the boy so many treats he found it difficult to leave, and so when she opened the front door of the shop the next morning to find Mrs Crawford twisting the wicker handle of her basket in her hands, Clara was sure she was about to be reprimanded for keeping the boy for such long hours.

"I thought I could come and do a bit of work, or something like that, while your maid is away, as a favour," she said. When the tall woman spoke, her teeth moved around in her mouth. Clara tried not to laugh.

She had kept doctors' houses before, Mrs Crawford said, ten times the size of her own, and missed the work, how it kept her mind off things. *What things?* Clara wanted to ask her. *Your son did not die in Ypres, what could your mind possibly need to be kept away from?*

But Clara didn't mind having Mrs Crawford around. It gave her a chance to observe the woman: how every day she'd almost drink them dry of tea, and how she rubbed the Brasso on the doorhandles so hard she nearly rubbed them clean off the doors. She always worked harder when she thought Clara was watching. But Clara was not watching her work, she was looking at the woman's skinny hips and small bust, and wondering how an intelligent boy like Harry was ever born from such a scrawny old hen.

"You are not happy, are you Mrs Crawford?" Clara said out loud to her one day while watching the woman scrub the steps so hard that her dentures fell out of her mouth.

Mrs Crawford grabbed her teeth and gobbled them up with her bare gums before Clara could see. But Clara did see.

"Moff wewwy, mo," she said, and moved her tongue around in her mouth like a giraffe, then said again, "Not very, no."

Clara tried not to smile. "Why is that, dear?"

"It is my husband. He—"

"Oh yes," Clara said. "That must be hard for you."

It is funny, Clara thought, as she stepped over Mrs Crawford on her way up the stairs, how normal and happy people look at night, under the electric lights, from a distance.

### GEORGE PARNELL

George Parnell's mum was the sort who'd go to the pictures and come back clutching four wet hankies in her hands, her eyes swollen and red with crying, then go back the next week to put herself through it all over again. So when George found his dad's mate Harry Crawford sitting on the back doorstep, it didn't come as a surprise. His mum had simply taken in another stray.

When George woke up the next morning, Mr Crawford was there, slumped at the kitchen table, licking a plate of beans clean with his tongue. And Mr Crawford was frowning into a cup of tea when George came home late the following night. George lost count of the evenings Mr Crawford would turn up on the front doorstep with a bottle of beer in one hand and a quiver in his eyebrows that made George's mum put her hand on her heart and say, "Oh no, what has she done now?"

"She's seeing a plumber in North Sydney, I'm sure of it," Mr Crawford would say.

Or: "This morning when I told her I loved her, she kissed me on the cheek and didn't say anything in response."

Or: "She didn't make me any dinner."

George knew when a woman didn't make her husband dinner things were drastic. George's mother breathed in sharply as if she needed to go to the toilet very badly but had to wait in a queue, then made Crawford a breakfast five times better than any breakfast she ever made for George.

When George's dad came home, George's mum told him about the unmade dinner, and George's dad said, "Look, I like Crawford a lot, but if a wife is acting like that it must mean he isn't any good in bed. A satisfied woman is a happy woman, Lydia, you should know that."

"Yes, you're quite right," George's mum said, looked sideways at George, and changed the subject.

### LYDIA PARNELL

Couples were everywhere at the shops, walking arm in arm, padlocked to each other's elbows. Lydia preferred to shop alone. Too many times had she taken her husband to the shops only to watch him spiral into a pit of despair at the sight of how expensive butter had become, or snap at a shopkeeper for asking how he was. "DO YOU ACTUALLY CARE, OR ARE YOU TRYING TO SELL ME SOMETHING?" he would shout in their blank, professional faces. After a trip to the shops, he would go for long walks and come back wild in the eye, as if he

had stalked up to the mountains, killed a shopkeeper with his teeth, and returned when the animal in him had been satiated. Yes, it was better for everyone if she shopped alone.

Lydia knew that when people were at the shops, they were simply playing the role of people at the shops. They held themselves upright and said “Hello, how are you?” or “Very well, thank you,” when what they really meant to say was “Give me your money,” or “Get away from me”. When they reached into their bags and fetched their wallets it was as if they were reaching into their soft bellies to pull out secret body organs they were ashamed of. Lydia preferred what people became at night, after a few drinks. Then their raw, bared hearts insulated her against the cold and she became a kind of woman priest, listening to people’s moral conundrums.

But when Lydia saw her husband’s friend from the rubber works, Harry Crawford, walk into the butcher’s arm in arm with his wife, smiling, without a single wrinkle on his usually worried brow, her world flipped in on itself, like a sock getting turned out of its pair. This man had spent many late nights and early morning breakfasts pouring the tale of his un-loving wife into Lydia’s spongy heart. He had wept. She had been humbled by the sincerity of his feeling. But seeing them now, content and about to buy chops together, Lydia was hit in the chest with the realisation that perhaps this was how people really were: all stiff and *how-do-you-doing* their way through the world. Perhaps the loose ease they arrived at after a few beers was a whole other world invented by, and for, drunks—a realm that felt more authentic when you were sobbing at its depths, but when remembered the next day was as ridiculous and invented as a description of hell.

### JANE WIGG

Mrs Wigg was standing on her verandah when she heard the front door of number five click open. It was the Friday before the long weekend and she had been planning to go in and make a slice for the eisteddfod committee meeting, but now that there was some promise of conversation she thought she would go to the front gate to see if its hinges needed an oil.

Number five was a dark weatherboard house made darker by the large banksia tree out the front. At night, she could hear the house creaking like a sailing ship on a high sea. It moved, even on still nights, in a way her own solid brick house couldn’t. What made it move she could not be sure. She had heard a scream come from inside its walls one night a few months back, and a door slam, and after that the tall Mrs Crawford always looked like a long blade of spinifex, rooted, but always reaching away.

Mrs Wigg had never seen her neighbours together. Their house was a magician’s box—one person would go in, and another would come out. What happened inside those dark rooms was anyone’s guess. Their front door could have opened onto the soft white cheese of the moon for all she knew; she had never been invited in to find out.

She opened and closed her gate like someone in a picture show stuck on a jammed reel. The hinge creaked, creaked again, and her arthritic knees sang back. She looked up at the couple to say something about the gate or her knees but they would not look at her no matter

---

how hard she tried to catch their eye. They simply walked to their front gate, unlatched it, and moved smoothly up the road.

It was forenoon, and the sun was thrown so high in the sky it looked as if it would never come down. The trees her neighbours passed had been released from their shadows, and even tall Mrs Crawford with her gabardine raincoat and small square picnic basket was cut free from her house and drifted up the hill towards the light.

Mrs Wigg would never forget the moment, because it was the last time she ever saw the woman in her life.

---

# THE CUCKOLD

## OCTOBER LONG WEEKEND, 1917

GEORGE ROBERT SMITH

Robert's wife was sick. Robert's wife was never sick, a fact he'd been blissfully unaware of until he saw her sweating in their sheets and muttering like a woman possessed. *Just my luck*, Robert thought. *Just my luck for my wife to fall ill at the start of a long weekend.*

In the kitchen, the breakfast things were still out. It was night now and they might have been out like this for days. He had no idea where a person would put breakfast things away to, so he went back into their bedroom and asked his wife.

"Mwrth?" she said, trying, and failing, to open her swollen eyes.

"And what should I fix for dinner?"

"Miss."

"What?"

"Minnncceee," she said again, then reached for the remedy the doctor had left in a vial by the bed. His wife had been drugged up to the teeth and now he was hungry and couldn't get the simplest of instructions out of her.

Down the hallway he heard the *pad pad pad* of feet and knew the kids were about to come at him with complaining mouths and empty stomachs and unfortunately even though he was the only one awake enough to say the word "mince" without falling into a fever he had no idea how to cook it.

Robert went into the kitchen again and opened the meat chest. A fly flew out of it, directly at his eyes. This was the first bad omen. Then he saw the big parcel of white paper, which was now mostly red with blood and smelled of meat about to turn. He stared at the meat, trying to remember what his mother used to do with it, but his youngest child was clutching his leg and staring up at him with the large golf-ball eyes of the malnourished. Enough was enough, Robert thought. It was time to borrow another man's wife.

It was late on Friday night, the night before the long weekend, but nonetheless Robert knocked on every door on Bush Street and asked if the blokes who answered would lend him their wives for the night. One man asked him if he was drunk, and another man nearly

punched him in the face, thinking he wanted to feel his wife up. "No, just to do a bit of housework while my wife is sick!" he shouted through the wood of the closed door.

The only person left to ask was Crawford, over on The Avenue.

He did not particularly like Mrs Crawford. She was tall and thin and her nose spent most of its time turned up over other people's heads. She thought she was more refined than everyone else, but she wasn't so refined that she could crawl her way out of living in a worker's cottage with an odd sort of man like Crawford. She would probably look at the mess of dishes in his sink and shake her head to make him feel small, but now that his wife was sweating their bedroom up into a diseased miasma he had no choice. He knocked on the Crawfords' door.

Standing in the doorway, looking over Crawford's shoulder into the house behind him, he could see that now was not the time a man should ask another man for a lend of his wife. The lino was up, the crockery in piles on the kitchen table, and Crawford's face looked as bitter and withered as a grapefruit left to shrivel up on the tree. But Robert was here now, so he took off his hat and said:

"I've come round to see if you will let me have your wife to come and do our housework."

"Oh, you're too late," Crawford said. "She's cleared out."

Robert half-expected Crawford to close the door on him then, but he stayed standing there, looking at his shoes, and for a moment Robert had the overwhelming urge to give the man a hug.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. And meant it.

Crawford asked Robert to come inside, but did not step back straight away, and Robert thought Crawford would have welcomed a hug if they had been women and one had been offered. After the weeks they'd both had, losing their wives to varying degrees, Robert hoped Crawford would crack open the beer—or better yet, the whisky—so they could have the warm feeling of a hug flowing inside their veins without having to touch, but after stepping into the house Robert could see that things were worse than he first thought. The bedroom was all upside down; the mattress had literally been flipped. At the sight of the bare, twisted mattress, Robert wanted to see his wife, and press the disease out of her forehead with a damp cloth until she was well again. He did not know what he would do if she was gone.

"I'm sorry," Robert said before they had even reached the kitchen, "I really should get back to her."

"Will you take some things to mind, just for a day or two?"

"Yes," Robert said, because he could hardly refuse a man in such a desperate state as that. And so he left with a small trunk, a sewing machine and a hat box—for his wife to put away, when she was well enough.

#### ERNEST BONE

Ernest Bone was finally alone. His wife and the Crawford boy had packed for Collaroy in the usual frenzy that packing for Collaroy inspired. Bathing suits were forgotten, then remembered. Trips between the front door and the stairs, the stairs and the bedroom, the bedroom

and the front door and the stairs, made the rooms of the house feel too closely threaded up together, the threat of being trapped too great. But at three o'clock on Saturday afternoon, the wheels of the dray carrying his wife and the boy on its back finally crunched down the road.

The shop was silent. No one was telling him to hurry up and stack the shelves or fetch a vat of shortening from downstairs, and although he was enjoying standing in the space vacated by his wife's nagging voice, he knew that a moment of stillness was enough. Any longer and the silence would peel back to reveal a gaping black purposelessness, one best not thought about at all.

He took the opportunity to go to Howley's to buy some vegetable seeds. His garden was only three yards long by one yard deep and ran along the fence between the back of the house and the dunny, but when he worked in it he felt the few remaining hairs on the top of his head strengthen and stretch towards the sky. When his hands were covered in soil he did not care that the miracle of his thinking, feeling body moving through space had done little more with its miraculousness than sell housewives cakes of soap. In his garden, he could make life spring up out of the earth, or not. There was something operatic about bringing the full bosom of an eggplant to fruition and plucking it, still warm with sun, to devour. If it weren't for his garden, the god in him would satiate its lust for growth and destruction by becoming a tumour in the base of his brain. He knew this, and sometimes he was afraid.

As he walked towards Howley's shop the sound of the coins in his pockets filled his ears with something closer to music than silence and he was happy. But on the walk back he only saw the neighbours' wisteria frothing over their fences in purple and white, and the foxgloves twitching their beards at him in the breeze. Spring had already sprung for so many on Lyons Road. If he stayed away from his garden any longer, perhaps his seeds would not grow and the bees would hum at a higher, more anxious pitch.

He walked faster towards his garden, but as he did he heard footsteps behind him, walking even faster than his own. It was as if he could hear his own anxiety trying to catch up with him, so it could pounce and rip open his throat at the jugular.

"Mr Bone!" said his anxiety. He turned around to look it in the face. It was Mr Crawford's face, attached to Mr Crawford's nervous body. His clothes looked like they had been slept in; his eyes were searching for something in Ernest's eyes, but were either not sure what they wanted, or weren't sure how to ask for it.

"Hello, just getting home?" he asked Mr Crawford.

"Yes, the bugger's cleared out," Crawford said, still searching. Perhaps it was pity he was after?

"Who?"

"The Missus. She goes away with other men."

Ernest blushed at the thought. "Oh, I don't think so, I don't think she's a woman like that."

"I can bloody well prove it, I've got letters I can show you."

Ernest did not want to hear about Mrs Crawford, other men, letters and running away. It sounded like the complicated ravings of a paranoid drunk. And now Crawford was ranting about how the Bones had lured the boy Harry away against his will, how he wanted the boy back. The calm green idyll Ernest had been cultivating inside himself was fast withering away.

"That's a funny thing," Ernest said. "Why does the boy always want to go?"

Crawford floundered in the face of such a simple question, with its obvious answer. The boy wanted to go to Collaroy because he hated being at home with his stepfather. That was obvious.

“Oh, he’s a bloody young liar,” Crawford blustered out, “you can’t believe him.”

An odd thing to say, Ernest thought, as he watched Crawford cross the road. He turned away from the man, and as he did felt the blackness inside him lighten to a dark green, thirsty only for rain. His seeds would soon be dropped into the earth. He did not know which particular flickers of light and drops of rain would burst those seeds into shoots and leaves and flowers and maybe, finally, an eggplant. He did not care. It would be a beautiful, violent thing, and that would be enough, for now.

### EDITH HOYES

Mrs Hoyes was standing just behind her gate, as she had taken to doing in recent months, to watch for new couples walking up and down her street. No one could see her watch them from there, or, if they could, like sharks being gawked at through aquarium glass, they could do nothing about it. She often stood with a pair of shears in hand, and held them poised above the rose bush in a tableau of industriousness, knowing full well if she clipped her hedge back any further, it would not resemble a rose bush any more than a tangle of barbed wire jabbed into the dirt.

It was a subdued Monday evening on The Avenue, as the long final night of a three day weekend often is, and Mrs Hoyes was just about to give her street up for dull when she saw her neighbour, Mr Crawford, stride down the hill towards his house. He moved with his usual, exaggerated steps, but this time he was walking at such a pace and with such a distressed look on his face she dissolved the fourth wall of her imaginary aquarium and dared speak.

“Mr Crawford, is anything the trouble?” she asked fiercely, but with respect, the way a person might speak to a shark. He looked at her and showed his teeth and Mrs Hoyes was suddenly aware of how odd she looked: her arm frozen above her massacred rose bush, holding a pair of shears in the dark. She could not move it, though, in case the movement drew too much attention, so she stood confidently, as if Mr Crawford was the strange one for not having a pair of shears of his own.

Mr Crawford stood on the footpath in front of Mrs Hoyes’ gate, rubbing his forehead. “She’s gone away,” he said.

“Gone away? Where to?”

“I don’t know,” he said and Mrs Hoyes saw that what light there was in his eyes lit two vast rooms both empty of his wife. She was genuinely lost to him.

She relaxed her frozen arm by her side. How curious, she thought. Curious, but not that surprising. The Crawfords’ house was always very quiet—there were never any wild rows that she could make out, even with her ear pressed against the wall, and she once saw Mr and Mrs Crawford walking arm in arm up towards Lyons Road, the way lovers did on postcards from Paris. But then you always heard rumours.



“Has she taken her clothes?” she asked.

“Yes,” Crawford said, standing outside his full house, “she has taken everything and left me nothing.”

By the look on his face, Mrs Hoyes knew he was not talking about Mrs Crawford’s clothes, or her suitcase, or anything Crawford could hold in his hands at all.

### HARRY BIRKETT

When Harry arrived home from Collaroy late on Monday night, all he wanted to do was go to sleep and dream of the long orange beach stretching out on either side of him again—its stealthy rips, the tough plants clinging to the dunes, Mrs Bone’s wet swimming dress shaped around her clutchable thighs—but when he walked up the front path he saw that the front door of his house was as open as a throat and a lantern in the kitchen was moving yellow light around in the hallway.

When Harry stepped into the kitchen, Crawford did not look up. He sat, staring into the wood-grain eyes of the table. One of his hands rested next to a bottle of whisky, a quarter of which was gone, the other beside an empty glass.

Something was wrong. Crawford never drank whisky.

Harry stood and Crawford sat in the still house like this for some time. There were no night birds calling to each other from the neighbour’s trees and it was too cold for crickets. There was maybe the rustle and thump of a possum crashing through a tree onto the neighbour’s roof but it could have been the sound of Harry’s heart falling through his chest and thudding like a fish onto the floor.

“What’s happened?” Harry asked.

Crawford said nothing.

“Where is my mother?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” Crawford said, but the bottom had fallen out of his voice and Harry did not believe him.

“Where is she?” Harry asked again.

Crawford turned to the boy and saw him standing there in the twitching light, red and cringing in his adolescent limbs.

“She has gone to North Sydney with a Mrs Murray and her daughter,” he said, to stop the boy from asking again.

The two men looked at each other for a long time. One of them was a jungle cat, the other its prey, and Harry felt for the first time in his life something fierce rise up in him. If Jack Johnson, world champion boxer, were standing before him at that moment he would have automatically known how to pummel his jaw into a paste of teeth and tongue. He was the cat. He would not be the one to look away.

“Would you have a drop of whisky?” Crawford finally asked the boy.

“No,” Harry said, shook the visions from his head, and went to bed.

The next morning barely anything had changed. Crawford was still sitting at the kitchen table, his back towards the doorway, his right hand resting next to an empty glass, but the shadows had crawled back under the furniture and the whisky had practically disappeared from the bottle. It was now sweating out of Crawford's skin.

This time, when Harry entered the room Crawford stood and swayed as if he were on a ship and clutched the chair to balance. He looked at the catastrophe of fences, sunlight and clotheslines out the window and went to the stove to make tea.

Harry saw that Crawford's hand was shaking as he struck a match against the side of the matchbox. And when the flame took on the gas burner Crawford flinched and turned his face as if half expecting the flames to leap up towards the ceiling.

"Let me do that," Harry said, "you're too drunk."

"Oh no. No no." Crawford shook his head hard.

"Did you fight with her?" Harry asked, hoping Crawford was so drunk he would forget to lie. Crawford nodded.

"Did she say when she would come home?" Harry asked.

"I don't know," Crawford said, dropping the tea canister on the floor. "No."

"No, or you don't know?"

Crawford nodded, shrugged, wavered. Crawford slowly lifted the kettle off the stove with a tea towel wrapped around both hands, as if the kettle held Harry's mother inside it, shrunk to the size of a pea. He lifted off the lid and looked inside.

"Here, let me do that," Harry said again.

"No! Please. It is the least I can do for her now."

### LYDIA PARNELL

Crawford came to Lydia first thing on Tuesday morning. He said his wife had not been home all night. He said he was upset, he did not have any idea of where she would have gone to, and would she get him some breakfast?

He looked struck by stage fright, even adorably lost. She had thought only children could look this genuinely helpless in the face of an incomprehensible world, but Crawford had something of the child's state of shock to him now, and it had Lydia fixing him something to eat at once.

He stood in the kitchen rubbing his face, as if trying wake from this world into one where his wife was by his side at the butcher's buying skirt steak, but it was no use. Lydia opened her last tin of baked beans and as she spooned them into the saucepan on the stove, searched for the right things to say.

"Do you think she is with that plumber you had been worried about?" she asked.

He looked at his shoes. "Yes," he said, and they were silent again.

Lydia placed the beans and two bits of bread on the table in front of him. "Perhaps she is in North Sydney, with the plumber."

Crawford was listening hard. He nodded.

"Or perhaps they went away to the country?" she suggested.

He ate, and when he was full, leaned back and said with confidence, "The thing to do, of course, would be to get rid of the home."

*Oh no*, Lydia thought. *What have I begun?* She'd planted ideas in his head, and now he'd already decided his wife was never coming home.

#### CLARA ANNIE BONE

The boy had been working in the shop with her full time for a year now. He certainly had his moods as all teenagers did, but this particular bad mood seemed to thud upon the shop like the wing of a burning aeroplane that had fallen out of the sky. And after such a lovely weekend away, too. He had been good to her at Collaroy, always with his jacket laid down for her on the sand, his arm outstretched, helping her on and off the cart, or rushing to open doors. But on the morning after Eight-Hour Day the boy came in and went straight down to the cellar to do the stock take, a job she knew he'd chosen because he wouldn't need to speak to anyone else for hours.

Without the boy around, the day shuffled slowly on until Harry Crawford came into the shop. From upstairs in the office she could hear Crawford's voice through the woodwork of the house. He called out the boy's name a few times, but she did not hear a peep from the cellar. Clara stayed put, and listened as hard as she could from where she sat. He was talking to her husband, and she hoped her husband was not letting Crawford walk all over him, the way he often let people do.

Once she heard the *creak-thump-ting* of the door slamming shut she thought it safe to come out.

"What was that?" she asked Ernest from the top of the stairs.

"The blighter wants Harry home right this second," Ernest said, making his way to the back door. "Oh, and he won't be coming back, either."

#### HARRY BIRKETT

At home the scene was the same. Crawford was sitting with his back to the door, but now there was a tablecloth on the kitchen table tingeing Crawford's smooth skin green, and there was a little pork fritz and bread and butter where the whisky bottle had been.

"Why did you want me to come home?" Harry asked. "Is she back?"

Crawford did not answer him. Instead, they ate, letting their knives and forks scrape against their plates and teeth to fill the empty room with sound.

---

After eating they cleared the table together, and washed up at the sink side by side. Crawford was sober now, but Harry could see the booze had opened up new rooms inside him. Rooms—or dark, musty dungeons. He wanted to hug the man, but knew he wouldn't. He would go to bed early and lie staring at his ceiling with his arms held stiffly by his sides. He was angry, because Crawford would not answer any of his questions, or even hold him, and he did not know where to put his arms, they were so long and thin.

# THE STEPFATHER

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3, 1917

## HARRY BIRKETT

When the light in the sky was pallid and groggy Harry was dragged up from the depths of sleep by Crawford shaking his shoulders saying, "Get up as quick as you can." Harry rolled out of bed, pulled on his pants and shirt before even thinking to ask what had happened. He could hear footsteps in the hall. Two sets. Then there was the sound of cans being slid off shelves in the kitchen and clattering into a bag. There was Crawford's voice and the voice of a boy. Once Harry had one side of his shirt tucked into his pants he walked down the hall, toes first. The house felt as fragile as a blown egg. To walk suddenly or violently or even normally would have caused the house to crumble to bits.

From the dining room doorway he could see Crawford and the Parnell boy clearing out the kitchen cupboards at a manic rate. Had the Germans come? There were no sounds of planes. Was there a flood? No, it was not raining, though the air felt hot and heavy, the clouds about to drip sweat.

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, but Crawford turned to the Parnell boy and said, "The ice chest; don't forget to empty the ice chest."

"What are you doing?" Harry asked again, stepping into the kitchen.

"Go back into the dining room," Crawford snapped. "I'll explain soon."

From the dining room window, Harry watched the Parnell boy leave the house weighed down by a sack full of the groceries Harry had ordered and brought back from work only that week.

"Where is he taking our food?" Harry asked. He was fourteen now and as strong as Crawford, but in the nervous way of a boy unused to his own strength. Ever since they'd moved to Drummoyne, Harry had become afraid of the moods that had been welling up in Crawford and cracking against the walls of their house. At Perdriau's bits of machinery sporadically exploded, separating ears from heads and flinging the young women who worked there against the walls. Crawford had only mended tyres there but still he would come back stinking of rubber as if his limbs were slowly being replaced with the stuff. He would come

back swearing too, at the enamel mug he took to work when he dropped it in the sink, at his jacket if he got his elbow caught in the sleeve when he was trying to shake it off, at Harry's mother if she ever tried to open the bathroom door when he was soaking in the bath. When Crawford lost his job it was Harry's mother who sulked and yelled and now she had taken off without a trace, without even a note.

"I have sold the furniture and there is a man coming for it and I want you to come to town with me," Crawford said.

"What for?" Harry asked.

"Never mind, put your shoes on," was the only answer he got.

Harry and Crawford followed the boy with the sack full of their food through the streets of Drummoyne. The light was more robust now and the men who worked some distance away were already moving towards the tram with their heads bent to the ground, watching their feet walk them there.

When they were in the Parnells' kitchen, Harry was told to sit at a table and wait for breakfast while Crawford and Mr Parnell went to another room to talk in hushed and hurried voices.

Breakfast, when it came, was bread and butter and beans stolen from their house. Mrs Parnell watched Harry eat, standing by with a pot of beans in her hand and spoon at the ready in case Harry needed more. The woman was looking at Harry as if she was about to cry on his behalf.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked her.

"That's sad news about your mother," she said. "I'm sure she loves you, she is just not thinking straight."

"What news about my mother?" Harry asked, but then Crawford was in the doorway with a newspaper in one hand and the woman was looking at Crawford with her hand covering her mouth, saying "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"I'll be back in an hour," Crawford said, throwing the paper on the table in front of Harry so that the knife and fork jumped on his empty plate.

"What was that about my mother?" Harry asked the woman, but again she said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything," then turned her back on him and wiped down the bench once more.

For a full hour Mrs Parnell fussed around Harry, clearing his plate, wiping down the table in front of him, sweeping the floor under his chair, leaning against the kitchen bench, watching him turn the pages of the paper. And for an hour Harry tried to read. He read every advertisement for false teeth and blood pills. He read about the revolution brewing in Russia, he read about how many Australian prisoners were held captive in Germany, he read about the price of eggs, but none of it was sinking in, because none of it had anything to do with his mother.

## CLARA ANNIE BONE

Clara Bone rose gradually from shallow dreams of prawn-pale limbs washed up on a long grey beach. She recognised those limbs—the toes of her son, or were they the ankles of the boy Harry? Whoever they belonged to, they looked familiar in a way that made her fierce.

Clara pulled back the curtains to flush her room of all ill-feeling, but saw instead Joel Hart the furniture man carting a bureau out of the Crawfords' house to his van. No, she had not imagined it. The boy had been taken away from their shop. He would not be coming back.

At eight, the boy was not there to help open. He was not there at half past eight either. Or nine. She hoped Mr Crawford was only momentarily angry at something unintentionally offensive her husband had said, and he would soon cool down and let the boy return. But when she saw Crawford stride up the hill towards the shop with something clutched in his hand, time sped up. Trees dropped their leaves, grew new shoots, and she was dressed and down in the shop, ready to put him in his place.

“What on earth do you think you are playing at?” she asked Mr Crawford before the door had closed behind him. “Do you know what it's like to run a business when people keep taking your boys away?”

All he could say to her was, “My wife has gone away with another man,” and look at the floor with the same pitiful droop to the eyes that Prudence used whenever she wanted to be fed.

“Rubbish. I don't think she is a woman like that,” she said, and thought: *Her bust is too flat for a start.*

He stepped forward and put a set of keys on the counter, being careful to stay at least a yard away from Mrs Bone at all times. “For Wyatt, the landlord,” he said, and retreated backwards out of the shop, careful not to show the woman his back in case she threw the cash register at it, or saw too much of the soft hair on the back of his head.

## HARRY BIRKETT

Harry was tugged out of the Parnells' house into a day fully alive and crawling with men on their way to the tram or the shipyards or the factories to work.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked, but he was not told. He was told instead to hurry up.

When a tram was seen pulling out of a stop on Bridge Street both Crawford and Harry ran for it, grabbed a siderail and swung themselves onto the carriage.

*We are going to find mother,* Harry thought, but he did not dare ask Crawford if this was right.

They got off at the railway and Crawford did not stop to get his bearings, look at street signs or the signs on the trams. He opened the palm of his hand and counted the coins there and then they walked, Harry noticed, in the direction of seagulls and salt.

The streets were full, but oddly quiet. Horses trotted past and men propped up doorways, smoking cigarettes, but none of them seemed to be making any noise. They walked through

dark gullies of streets sunk between sandstone buildings until they reached the water sucking at the pylons of Circular Quay.

“Two tickets for Watson’s Bay,” Crawford asked the man behind the ferry ticket counter. “One way,” he added, and even though Harry had not spoken in some time, Crawford turned to him and said, “We are going to take the tram back, in case you were wondering.”

As they waited for the ferry, Crawford sat on the edge of the bench, leg jiggling, eyes up. He seemed wary of the seagulls looking down at them from the top of pylons and the roofs of buildings along the quay.

It was hard to make out the buildings on the other side of the harbour—where they ended and began—because the sky above the harbour was misted over with spume and fog and Harry couldn’t think clearly. He could just see windows in the clouds—it looked like people lived in the clouds. Why had his mother left? Was it something he had said?

He asked Crawford: “Was it something I said to her?”

Crawford said nothing. Perhaps he thought it was.

The ferry was small and though the harbour was flat and dark under the heavy clouds, the boat moved in a sickening way. Crawford leant against the railing, looking out, as if worried the ferry might not know the way and Harry slumped back, not only in the ferry seat, but inside himself, so that he watched Crawford from eyes inside his own.

The ferry curved around Garden Island, past boats pulling against their moorings like horses tied to fences, itching to run. They passed leisure yachts named after violent, hungry pursuits: *Buffalo Hunter*; *Moby-Dick*; *Pirate Queen*. They passed the green roughage of shrubbery and pipes cut out of the sandstone walls like sawn-off arteries, dribbling black water into the harbour. They passed houses tiered like syrup cakes. They passed fragments of regular lives lived in those grand houses: a maid collecting undergarments from a clothesline; a woman on an upstairs balcony, pacing backwards and forwards.

“What are we doing?” Harry asked, but the wind was loud and Crawford didn’t register the sound of Harry’s voice.

Up on a hill, a convent school and church with a dark spire spiked two clouds in the guts, but still the rain would not spill out.

They arrived at Watson’s Bay at a time when only housewives and old men were out in their gardens or walking through the streets. It was a slow, weather-beaten outpost of Sydney and the wind stung through the weave of their jackets and the pores of their skin, making their bones thrill with cold. Crawford gripped Harry by the wrist and tugged him up the hill, through a park, until they were standing at the raw edge of the coast.

Down below, the Tasman was a deep wild blue, the blue of fish eyes, not the dirty green of the harbour, and the cliff face reaching up out of it was jagged, as if the country beyond



this point had been dissolved, in one instant, by a freak acid wave. Along the top of the cliff, a fence kept people netted in, though the fence was rusted through with salt and was easily peeled back in places. Leading up to the fence, knife-sharp grasses strained against the wind. Trees bent back, flipping the silver undersides of their leaves at the sky. The only tall tree to be seen was a scraggy pine. Crawford climbed the path towards it and Harry followed.

“Where are we going?” Harry asked.

Crawford still said nothing. The wind carried a child’s voice up from Watson’s Bay below, then changed direction and brought with it only the slap of waves against rock.

Harry stopped in the middle of the path. “Crawford! Stop walking. Please!”

But Crawford did not stop; he kept climbing the path and Harry had to run to catch up.

At the summit, part of the cliff hooked out and around into nothing, but in its crook a stubborn green succulent grew, its leaves swollen with the strain of clinging. “Why are these fences here, wrecking the view?” Crawford said. “Come over to the other side and throw rocks with me.”

Harry didn’t move. From here he could see the hard rock platform below and how the waves shattered against it. The sandstone of the cliff they stood on looked as soft and collapsible as a skull, the grass on top as rough as salty, blood-matted hair.

“No, Crawford, I want to go back.”

Harry’s eyes stung. The rain seemed to be falling upwards here, right into them.

“I want to go back!” he yelled. “Can you hear me? There are signs, can’t you read the signs?” But of course Crawford couldn’t read the signs, because Crawford couldn’t read, and now Harry was sobbing with frustration. Despite his height and his new strength he could not make Crawford leave or read the signs or tell him where his mother was. He could only retreat back into being a boy and Crawford could not touch him when he was like this, he could only climb between the rocks and the wind-whipped grass and try to turn the cliff and the bitter wind into a game.

“Come up here, Harry! Come *on!*” Crawford called, as if to a dog, but the thin veneer of fun crumbled easily in the wind and underneath his desperation was an ugly pulsing thing.

Harry stayed right where he was. Sobbing. Not even bothering to cover his face. He felt raw and pathetic and his snot and tears mixed with the spume, making his face sting where the wind struck it, but he could not do anything else.

Crawford was not looking him in the face anyway, he was still walking here and there, finding stones to throw, then crawling through a gap in the fence and throwing them. The two went on like this: Harry sobbing, Crawford crawling in and out of the hole in the fence, collecting stones, throwing stones, trying to entice Harry into playing his game, until Harry went and sat on a rock—a numb, crumpled shell of a boy, embarrassed by his own tears. He watched an ant crawl up and fall off a twig again and again until eventually he noticed Crawford sitting beside him.

“Are you hungry, kid?”

Harry felt himself nod.

“You want to go get a pie?”

Harry nodded again.

“Alright, let’s go and get a pie.”

On their way down the hill, Harry noticed the sapling of a pawpaw tree growing amidst a thicket of grass and prickles: a glimmer of the tropics in this bitter, wind-pummelled place.

“I thought we were going back by tram?” Harry asked as they boarded the ferry back to Circular Quay.

“Changed my mind,” Crawford said, but Harry suspected he hadn’t changed his mind. His mind had been worn down.

It would be a full three quarters of an hour before they could eat. The ferry would stop at Rose Bay and Double Bay and pass all the boats straining against their moorings and the grand houses with their elegant women trapped inside and Harry would have to sit there, so hungry his bones themselves felt hollow, his eyes heavy from crying, clutching his knees to his chest on the ferry bench. Crawford sat next to him and Harry thought he heard him say, “I’m sorry, kid, we’ll find her.”

When they finally arrived at Sargents pie shop Harry could have stuffed his face with every pie in the store and Crawford would have bought them all for him, too. Would you like a mince pie? Yes. With mushy peas? Yes. And a shepherd’s pie? Yes. Crawford could see Harry eyeing the cakes and sticky drinks. How about a pink cake? Or a lamington? Yes. Yes to both? Yes.

They walked up the hill towards the gardens, their arms overflowing with pies and cakes as if they were heading straight for a bunker to live out the rest of the war.

They ate by the large fountain in the gardens where businessmen languished on the grass, reading the Herald and nibbling at their cut lunches between paragraphs. And they ate furiously—almost in silence but for the sucking of stray meat back into their mouths and the growling of their stomachs. Ibises and pigeons stalked the grass between Harry and Crawford, pecking at the pastry crumbs that escaped their hands and mouths. Even as he ate, Crawford appeared deep in thought.

“What are you thinking about?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know. Eat your pie.”

“You must know what you’re thinking about.”

“Come on,” Crawford said, but what he meant was, *She has left me as well. Leave me be.*

When the pies were finished Crawford was silent and staring, fixated, at the fountain.

Harry asked again, “What are you thinking, Crawford? Tell me.”

“No, never mind. Come on,” Crawford said and made them move before their stomachs were ready, so that their steps were slow and their insides heavy as stone.

Once they started walking Harry suspected Crawford did not know where they were going. They walked in no direction in particular—or every direction at once—and it seemed like each corner turned was a new and different decision Crawford had made about what the day would bring. It was early afternoon now but the sun was obscured by cloud so the whole sky

glowed white. It could have been any time at all. And they seemed to be walking forever—the further they walked the more the minutes stretched out like pastry beneath their feet.

They eventually arrived at Sargents again but a different Sargents on Castlereagh Street near the Southern Cross Hotel.

“But we already ate, Crawford,” Harry said.

“Did we?” Crawford seemed genuinely confused.

“Yes. Just then. And I am so full now I can barely walk.”

Crawford reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver shilling. It glinted the same cold light of the distant, buried sun.

“Here,” Crawford said, flicking it to Harry, “buy yourself a cup of tea. I’ll be back for you in an hour,” and he crossed the street towards Hyde Park without once looking back over his shoulder.

He waited for Crawford under the awning of the shop and watched as the clouds finally filled the sky with a fine rain. The rain was so delicate it spun in the air like snow, dusting the wings of the pigeons lined along the lampposts. They shook themselves and as they did turned the rain into spray and by the time Crawford was back the spray had become rain again, pooling in puddles on the street.

The man and the teenager stood close together—almost touching—under a ledge at the side of the building. Crawford leaned his head back against the stone, shut his eyes and breathed out. It seemed to Harry like the first time Crawford had breathed all day.

“Let’s wait for this to pass,” Crawford said, and Harry couldn’t tell if he meant the rain or the breathing or what.

When the roar of the rain had given in to the sound of birds shrieking in the fig trees in the park, both Crawford and Harry moved out from under the ledge and followed the tram lines out of the city. They walked with more purpose now—the tram lines giving them direction—and eventually they arrived at a house with four windows flashing purple and white.

Crawford put a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“I’m going to leave you with Mrs Banner for the night,” he said, and walked back towards the tramline, the way they had come.

A screech of bats tore the sky open above their heads and Harry glanced up. He looked over Crawford’s way to see if he had noticed the sound, but he had gone. All that was left of the scene were two tram tracks, white with water and afternoon light, never touching, chasing each other to the quay.

## JACK CRAWFORD

### WOOLLOOMOOLOO, OCTOBER–NOVEMBER, 1917

#### HENRIETTA

She is ready to leave the house with her hat pulled low over her eyes and her laundry bag balanced on her hip when a sharp rap at the door has her spill tea towels and soiled undergarments all over the floor. “Got fick dam mi no mal,” she swears at a sweat-stained singlet. She is already overdue at the police station by an hour. What if that’s them now, come to check up on her?

Peeking out at the man on her front step she can’t see much. He has his back to her and the silhouette of his face, turned towards the Domain, is blurred by a cloud of cigarette smoke. But she can see that this gaunt man in grey trousers, a mismatched coat and worn hat is clearly not—to her great relief—an officer of the police.

“Yes?” she asks the man.

His face is drawn, the bags under his eyes are purple with sleeplessness. “I need a place to stay for a few nights,” he says.

“I see,” she says. She needs more tenants, but these days one has to be so careful. “And who might you be?” she asks, but in the same instant he asks, “You do run a boarding house, don’t you?” and in the confusion they both look at each other, waiting to see who’ll answer first.

“I am Mrs Shipley,” she says, doing her best to soften her consonants. “Und you?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Your name?”

“Oh,” he says. “Jack.”

She unlatches the door and steps back into the hallway, apologising for the mess as she does. He’d given her a fright, she says. That was all. The police is usually very clean. The place, rather.

The man, who can’t move for the tumble of boxes and bags he’s standing amongst, looks like he hasn’t eaten in days. No, he’s nothing to be frightened of. An opium eater, maybe, but he doesn’t appear to be the patriotic type. And was that a slight accent she could hear? Maybe he’s a Boer?

Now he is rattling off requirements, instructions. He needs a single room, with two beds. One for his step-son. He needs help with these boxes. And full board, too, once he gets himself a job. The transaction is swift and straight-forward because he has to go and attend to some furniture—whatever that means—and she has the laundry to wash, she says, gesturing to the mess on the floor to make sure he has no doubt laundry's the reason she is leaving the house. She shows Jack his room—the front room, bright, with nothing in it but two bare cot beds thrust against opposite walls—bundles up the laundry, and leaves.

At the corner of Crown Street, she hides the heavy laundry bag behind a bin, and looks back at the house to check no one has seen. Jack's on the front step with a fresh cigarette hanging off his lip. He's looking up towards the cathedral as a violin trill lifts from her husband's music room at the top of their terrace and tangles in the smoke from his cigarette. Thank God her husband has not yet been taken away. She cannot deal with people like this on her own, she simply does not have the nerve for it.

### JACK

At first the woman is just an eye, wide-open and scared. That eye can see right through the skin of my face.

She calls herself Mrs Shipley, but she gets her words mixed up in that way foreigners do. And there's something fishy about the way she opens the door. She opens it just a crack, lets the chain catch, and asks what I want before opening the door an inch further.

The hallway's covered in dirty laundry. She's nervous about it, tries to block my view. I look at her and the look says, *Smile at me. Go on, we're the same, you and me.* But she doesn't smile back.

The house smells of vinegar, and of something sweet also—I can't put my finger on it. Lamps are burning at their lowest gas mark—some corners of the hall throb with light, others fade into blackness. It's a tomb, this place, and it's restless with ghosts.

The foreign woman drops my suitcases and opens the door onto a bright room with nothing in it but two bare beds. There's a window. No curtain. It looks out over Cathedral Street below. The foreign lady has given us a front room, then. Good. I think that's good.

I haven't been sleeping. At night, I'm wired. During the day, I drift around in a fog. I'm not sure how things get done, but they do get done. Somehow I made it here. Decisions are being made through me, as if I'm being dreamed by someone else and in this dream, I'm a man who knows to pack up the house in Drummoyne, leave the keys for the landlord at the grocer, take the boy Harry, deflect all questions of his mother, and leave for a place where everyone lives as if they've been packed at a cannery.

But the boxes. Where are they? Out on the front steps where anyone might find them. When I open the front door there's my green box, full of her lace, her things, curtains she left half-mended. My green box, bending the light towards it. A violin trill escapes from the open upstairs window above, and it strikes me what the sweet, vinegary smell is that lingers in

the house. It's the smell of cabbage farts and pigs' blood. It's a German house, full of German smells. I almost laugh. No one will trust the word of a German woman, especially not the police.

### HENRIETTA

Standing in her kitchen with a letter held high between herself and the sun, Henrietta hears footsteps, then a cough, and turns to see a boy in the doorway.

"Hello there," she says, hiding the letter in her apron pocket.

"Hello," says the boy. He's looking up at her with the frightened eyes of a dog about to be hit. The poor thing can't be more than fourteen.

She stretches her hand out towards him. "It's alright," she says, "I don't bite."

The boy has his eyes trained on the biscuit tin on the kitchen bench. He must be starving. How strange that she should be reading a letter from her son and then turn to find a boy—about as tall as her son had been ten years ago, and as fair—standing before her. She must have dreamed him up. She fetches a biscuit for the boy, but he has already slipped down the hall and out of sight.

In the front room she can hear Jack rousing on him. "What did I say about keeping out of everyone's hair?" and "You're not to go in there without me, do you understand?"

So he's the step-son, then.

Henrietta stands still, listening for a squeak of a floorboard or the click of a door latch. When she's certain no one is about to discover her, she slips the letter out of her pocket and holds it up once more against the light. She will read every word Andrew wrote to her from that horrible place. Again and again. Especially the words that have been blacked out.

### JACK

The bats have begun their evening hunt. The sky is alive with them, flying—as if magnetised—towards the east. Sitting on my green box, looking out the window, I'm the only one who sees them.

The boy is here now, sitting on the edge of his bed and staring fiercely into the floorboards. I watch him closely, as if he might, at any second, sprout claws and wings and fly away.

"Any word from Mum?"

"No, kiddo."

"Did you even go to the police?"

"No need for that."

The boy misses his mother. The boy is like a sick animal, dragged away from water. I don't know what to do.

Out of the pub on the opposite corner, women stumble with their hair half-undone and falling over their faces, and men stumble with their arms half-lost in the women's blouses. They move in a slow dance, as if their bones have melted away, and I am melting into them, too. Fuck. How is it possible to feel this seasick a mile away from sea?

The boy speaks.

"Crawford?"

"Yes kid?"

"Do you think, once I've saved some money and can buy us a house, Mum might come back?"

"Maybe."

The boy is curled up on his side, his blanket folded over his hands under his chin. His eyes are bright—the light from the street lamp outside has lit two fires in them. He is staring at me, as if every answer I give is something he can peg into the ground to keep himself from drifting away.

I sit in the crook the boy's body makes, and stroke the hair out of his eyes. He has his mother's wild hair, his mother's graphite eyes, but some other man's jaw—a man who'd died years before and left the kid with nothing but a name and a jaw. How proudly the boy holds onto that name. It was the first word the boy learned how to spell, his mother said, and once he'd learned it he wrote it on every surface he could find to write on in the house. Everything was labelled Birkett. The underside of plates: Birkett. The address book: Birkett. The edge of the dishrags: Birkett. When I moved in, I was living a borrowed existence.

Daisy said the benefit to having her son grow up without a father was that all the boring, violent, less-than-perfect aspects of the man were not around. His empty name could be filled with the strongest, most honourable hero a boy could imagine. She never told him about the day his father moved to Newcastle so she couldn't nag him anymore, because she could see that there was something in the myth of the man that filled up the boy from within.

Sitting here, nursing another man's child to sleep, I can see how this kid might be my unravelling. This kid, who I have absolutely no claim to, who tries so hard to prove himself as a man that he lets his childhood slip through his fingers like sand.

The boy is asleep now, and I go back to my green box, watching the street below. Above the chimneys and spires of the city, the sky is a bruise, healing. Morning will come soon, but before it does my mind will wander in and out of sleep and memory, mistaking one for the other. Nothing will be left as it was found.

## HENRIETTA

She is up to her elbows in blood and fat. She has so much to do today and there is Jack standing in the doorway, moaning, "Are we having sausages for breakfast?" as if everything she does is for him. He is in the same rumpled suit he arrived in yesterday. He has not bathed, he has not changed; she wishes she never let him into her house.

"No," she says. "These are for my son."

"Where is he?"

“Where is your wife?”

A silence makes the morning light lemon-sharp in the eye and is not broken until her husband, sitting at the kitchen table, turns the page of his newspaper. His contribution, as it is most mornings, will be to read out the headlines from the paper, offering commentary when he deems it necessary.

“The Baltic Islands! Russians Hit Back!”

“Nothing to do with the war, please,” she asks.

“Grocer’s Profits! Prices Raised Without Authority!—does that count, Hettie?”

“No—but so dull, Eduard.”

“Chatswood Mystery,” he reads next. “Woman Not Yet Identified.”

“Alright, read that,” Henrietta says, because he will keep going on and on unless she lets him read something.

“The detectives engaged in clearing up the mystery surrounding the death of a woman ...”

Jack drops his cup in the kitchen sink. “Oh Mother! Mother!” she thinks he says. Is he sobbing—or laughing?

“Jack, what is wrong with you?”

He is pale. “I don’t know,” he says, and shakes his head. “I don’t know.” But when he looks up to see the boy standing in the doorway he acts as if he does know and he takes the paper from her husband, the boy by the shoulder and says, “Come and read for me in the room.”

### JACK

The boy is sitting on the green box, glaring right at me.

“It’s her, isn’t it?” he says.

I look at the picture of the shoes in the paper, “Now, calm down, we don’t know ...”

“What are you going to do?”

I say nothing.

“I suppose it doesn’t help anyone,” he says.

“What doesn’t?”

“Telling the cops that Mum’s a slut and went off with another bloke and—”

I take the boy’s hand in my own. “It’s not your fault,” I say. He tries to pull away, but I’m holding on so tight my fingers have turned white. “She left. That’s all we know.”

But really she hasn’t left. I can see her in everything. She is right there in the boy’s face.

### HENRIETTA

Her husband is in the upstairs music room, galloping through the Paganini concerto he and his mother had played for the Russian Tsar when he was only nine years old. He plays it when he wants to be back in old Europe, back at the beginning of his glittering future that never



eventuated, and now the whole house is unsettled. Even the suds in the sink are collapsing with disappointment.

Henrietta looks up from her wrinkly hands to see Jack pass down the hall. Her husband's plaintive violin is drawing the bottle of Johnnie Walker that Jack clutches in his hand up the stairs.

The concerto lands on a low G and stops so suddenly Henrietta puts down her dishcloth and listens. She hears silence, footsteps, her husband's bold, generous laugh. The sounds of two lost men, finding something of themselves in each other.

An hour later the sound of the men has become raucous. They are probably half way through that bottle of whisky, telling dirty jokes. The last thing she needs is for her loud husband to get on the bad side of the neighbours, or the boarders, or her own nerves, so she brews a pot of coffee and takes it upstairs.

"And so you see, the way we've been treated, I am starting to side with the German position in the war," she can hear her husband saying as she makes her way upstairs. "My family fled Germany over forty years ago for the exact same reason Britain is now at war with her, but here we are not allowed to own businesses. I have lost half my students. My wife's son—"

"Eduard!" she says so fiercely he puts the cap on the now half-empty scotch and hands it to Jack without her needing to say another word.

When she leaves, she leaves the door open. *I am listening*, the open door says. *I am always listening for you to break your promises, Eduard.*

Descending the stairs, she hears the chink of spoons in coffee cups, the mutterings of goodnight, Jack's voice in the open doorway: "Oh, and Edward—if two detectives come, remember: the boy and myself, we are not here."

## JACK

From my position on the green box I can see a figure walking down the footpath on the opposite side of the road. I can't quite make it out. I'm sure I can see a police helmet, but the figure crosses the road and the helmet becomes a mass of woman's hair, piled up on her head.

It is safer to sit here and watch than try to sleep.

## HENRIETTA

Returning home one afternoon, she can hear the sound of an axe splitting wood. Her paranoid heart speeds up, convinced that an intruder is at that moment smashing his way through her back door. She turns the key quietly and creeps into the house. She will not let that intruder get his hands on her husband's violin. He will have to cut her to pieces first.

In the back courtyard, Jack is hunched over the smashed remains of a green wooden box. Bits of lace and shreds of linen are strewn around his feet making him look like a lycanthrope just turned back into a man. She sees him raise the axe over his head again—his shoulders

broadening—and throw it down, scattering splintered wood across the yard. She's horrified—such good boxes, all broken up! They could be sold. And Jack, he owes her money. He has been paying her in lace and pretty pieces of wearing apparel that will never fit her even if she starves herself for a year.

“Jack!” She says, stepping out to take her husband's axe from his hands. “Your wife will come back to you.”

He lets her take the axe and slumps, as if the feel of the axe in his hands was the only thing giving him strength.

A low animal moan comes from him then. It has its own heartbeat. It is almost a song. “Oh no, no, no, I want her no more, no more, no more, she is no good, no good, no good, drinking too much.”

She puts a hand on his back—it is more bone than muscle when his arms have nothing to wield—and walks him into the kitchen to make him a coffee.

She puts the kettle on the hob and feels safer, moving through the ritual she knows so well. She feels so safe she dares say, “That is a funny thing that she leaves you without anything. Surely you had a row or something with her, she would not run away for nothing.”

“Yes,” Jack says, “I had a jolly good row with her and I gave her a jolly good crack to go on with.”

Henrietta does not believe that this man, on the verge of tears, could be the sort of over-bearing husband one reads about in the penny press. He is surely only violent the way a toddler gets violent, confused over how to hug a playmate without asphyxiating him to death.

“You should not hit a woman so hard,” she says with a pat on his hand. “It is not nice.”

Jack puts his head in his hands, as if he is sorry.

## JACK

Breaking up the box hasn't helped. Lying awake I can hear a noise coming from the corridor—a scratching made by flimsy nails. Closing my eyes only makes the noise louder, as if it's coming from the gas pipe, the window, the ceiling and the corridor at once.

I check the sleeping boy. He's out cold. Good. Sleep, boy, sleep sound enough for the two of us.

The hallway is so dark, it's dimensionless. I have to pull back to stop myself from falling. After my eyes have adjusted, I run a hand down the hallway wall towards the sound. The sound is coming from behind a door. I open the door and in the middle of a small room I can just make out the metal flute of a gramophone. In the dark it looks like the bell of a giant, carnivorous lily growing out of the dust on the floor.

The gramophone is spinning a record. Its needle slips, comes back, slips, comes back to the last second of the record.

Beside the gramophone is a candle and a box of matches. I light the candle, and see that the room I'm in is bare, except for the gramophone. The room is too small to be a bedroom, too big to be a cupboard. It has no windows, no shelves. I move the needle back to the begin-

ning of the record, and hear what sounds like my own voice. The record is playing at a very slow speed. I turn the handle of the gramophone, and a woman's voice comes to life.

"Take off your shirt," she says.

"No," my voice says.

"How is it we've been married for this long, and we've never slept flesh to flesh?"

"We aren't that sort of people."

"And why not? Take off your shirt."

"No. What's wrong with you? It's the middle of the day."

"Are you worried I'll laugh at your breasts?" she says.

The record slows; the voices through the trumpet become deeper, until they are the voices of two men at the bottom of the sea. I look to see that I have spilt candle wax onto the spinning record. It has spread along the grooves and congealed around the needle.

A gust blows the door of the room shut behind me. I turn, and there I am, reflected in a mirror on the back of the door.

The shadows under my eyes look like dark pools of water corroding the soft rock of my face. How could she have loved this face? How could anyone have loved this face, steadily weathering into powdered bone?

The figure in the mirror moves his mouth.

"Jack," the figure says.

"Crawford," I reply.

"What's troubling you?"

"I'm not sure. I can't seem to remember."

"Surely you can, if you can only be still for long enough."

Shutting my eyes I can see a woman with her mouth frozen open. A boy standing in the cold light of the kitchen late at night. Cold bodies hanging from hooks. Me, or someone like me, waltzing with them. A lily with fingers instead of petals, scrunched into the shape of a fist. A boy growing, bursting out of his shoes. The boy has a woman's face. Her eyes are spinning like planets, her hair is as wild as weeds in a summer field.

I open my eyes.

"It's the boy," I say. "Sometimes I see him out the corner of my eye, and it's her."

## HENRIETTA

When she arrives at the central police station, the officer at the front desk does not get out of his seat.

"Sheep Lick," he says, as he says every Wednesday just before lunch. Her presence is a punctuation mark in the digestive calendar of his week, nothing more.

"Yes, Henrietta Schieblich," she says in reply.

There is a woman officer there too, who looks up at Henrietta with a fleeting smile. She's often at the front desk, helping the secretary with the typing. But once Henrietta saw her walk

a fortune-teller through the station in handcuffs, and sometimes she can overhear the policewoman give a strumpety-looking girl a talking-to about how to turn her life around.

Henrietta walks past the policewoman, the bored officer, into the back room.

“Can you smell cabbage, Sergeant? I can smell cabbage!” the officer there says to his colleague, the same as he does every week. “Been building any trenches down Cathedral Street, Sheep Lick? Manufacturing any mustard gas in your lavatory?”

She lets him have his fun. It does not bother her. Her mind evacuates the room to monitor the weather, to think about the mending or what she will buy for dinner that can stretch to feed six. But when the officer says, “Sign here, Sheep Lick. And here,” as he inevitably does, her mind is brought back into the room.

This week, however, the officer has something to add.

“Going to be sending you over to the barracks, frau.”

“To the camp?” she asks. She is terrified of the camp, but also drawn to it, obsessed by it. She could be with her son again. She could trade one set of anxieties for another; one set of comforts for others greatly missed. (Her son’s face, when he tells her a joke; the way it lights up.)

“No. Listen. To the barracks. On Oxford Street. The army are handling you lot now. Krauts are apparently too dangerous for us.” The police officer looks disappointed and Henrietta smiles. She can’t help it. The police station is a lion’s pen of men trying to climb on each other’s backs. And his back—hunched over in the tiny office he had been allocated—supports much bigger backs than his.

When she returns home she forgets to tell her husband about the barracks, because there he is, meeting her at the door, pulling her in close, walking her up to the music room. He has not been this forthright with his affections since the Toowoomba Eisteddfod in 1908 when they had first met: the miracle meeting in a Queensland backwater of two Germans who loved Schubert.

But this afternoon her husband is not about to kiss her behind the music stands. He shuts the door.

“There was a fire,” he says.

“What? Where?” She sniffs the air, looks around the room. Before the war the two of them were laughed out of Queensland after trying to claim insurance for their incinerated home. Now, especially now, they would never have their claims met.

“Under the boiler,” he says. “It had been lit. And it was still burning with papers and lace. And there was a scissors there too, when I came home.”

He fetches a pair of scissors from where they hold a Haydn concerto down on his desk. The scissors are black with soot.

A storm lands over the city like a blanket thrown over a birdcage. The darkness is suffocating, and Jack is in the kitchen, pacing back and forth. He is like an ant, unsettled by the promise of rain, desperate to scurry. She can see he needs to get something off his chest to some-

one—anyone—but tonight, she would rather hear her knife splice potatoes than listen to him complain.

“I cannot stand it any more,” he says, without any prompt from her. “The bloody bastard’s no good, no good.”

“There is nothing wrong with the boy, the boy is real good,” she says, decimating a potato with six whacks of the knife.

“I must get rid of him,” he says. “I must take him to his aunty up the line.”

“Tell me the address,” she says. She is getting sucked in. “Tell me,” she says again, despite herself.

But he will not tell her. He sits at the table wringing his hands like a hammed up Lady Macbeth. Maybe he is a genuine lunatic. But what can she do? Get the doctor? Fetch the police? Not in this weather, and never to this house.

“Leave the boy here, and you can go elsewhere,” she suggests. “Find a job somewhere. I’ll look after the boy for a while.”

But this suggestion makes Jack worse. He stands up, sits down and stands up again, like a cuckoo clock out of touch with time, and when the boy comes in, already changed into comfortable clothes after work, Jack shoos him out, “Hurry up and dress yourself, and I’ll take you to your aunty.”

The boy whines.

“Now!” Jack roars.

She doesn’t understand why the boy doesn’t stand up to Jack. He is taller than Jack. Stronger too, probably. And yet he always sulks around like a reprimanded puppy. Jumping when Jack says jump. Going out whenever Jack says. But never smiling. Not once.

The two leave the kitchen and she hopes that’s an end to the drama for the night. Jack will calm down. He will take pity on the boy, and calm down. But a quarter of an hour later they are back again. The storm is worse. Jack is worse. He is out in the hall, raging in a raincoat, but the boy, he is only in a thin summer coat. It’s outrageous to take the boy out on a night like this. Why can’t he take the boy tomorrow?

“Yeah?” The boy says. “Why can’t I go tomorrow?”

“Ah, get out,” Jack says, and pushes the boy out the front door.

The wind throws the door open, and the rain comes into the hall in horizontal streaks.

“Wait a minute, Harry,” Jack calls to the boy, and she thinks: yes, good man for changing your mind. Good man for taking pity on the boy. She is about to say as much but he goes into their room to fetch a brand new shovel and is on his way again.

“What on earth are you going to do with that!?” she calls out to him.

“I am going to kill the bloody bastard!” he screams. The door slams, and she almost collapses on the floor.

---

**JACK**

Out in the rain things I was sure of now seem hazy. The boy is being good, the boy is doing what he is told. The boy is still asking questions, but they are thinning out now he knows I won't reply.

There are only a few people on the William Street tram. Young men going to the Cross—loud and calling to each other across the tram aisle, couples on their way home from the theatre. One woman, drunk, is abusing her husband for ogling one of the girls at the Tivoli.

The rain is streaking down the windows of the tram in floods. Two horses at the intersection wobble with rain. One shivers, melts, comes back together again.

We get out at Edgecliff and walk past trees backlit by lightning. The boy is silent and looking at nothing but his feet. He is shaking too, the clatter of his teeth sounds like distant hooves.

No-one will find us on a night like this, and our footsteps will wash away. But despite the sticky blackness, the houses on Ocean Road are bright. They are fitted out with electric lights and it seems like every one is trained, like a searchlight, on me and the boy, throwing hundreds of our shadows down at our feet.

We come to a flight of stone steps and go up. On the left hand side there is a thick scrub. I enter, and the boy follows. He always walks behind; he is somehow afraid to walk near me.

When we come to a space among the bushes I begin to dig a hole some three or four feet wide and longer, and three or four feet deep. The rain helps. The earth is soft and turning into mud.

I stop digging a couple of times to drink spirits from a bottle, and after I have the hole about four feet deep I say to the boy, "Now you get down and have a go."

The boy digs the hole a foot or so deeper, but he's started asking questions again. What do I want the hole for, he asks. I won't answer. He keeps an eye on me all the time until he gets tired and drops the shovel in the bottom of the hole. He climbs out, so I jump down and have another go at it, but it's no good, the earth is too rocky, so I climb out and search for sandier ground. I walk in and out of the bushes, branches flinging back into my face, my arms and hands are scratched but it feels good, it feels right. The boy is behind me, though. Watching, always watching.

After a while, the rain still streaming, I find a good spot and dig again. I dig about the same in width and length, but not nearly as deep as the first place, and ask the boy to help. He digs for a while but doesn't do much because by then he's soaking wet and shivering violently. All I can hear is his skeleton rattling in his skin so I give in.

"That's enough," I say, and throw the shovel away in the scrub.

**HENRIETTA**

The rain blends the hours together. People are passing through the rain outside and as they pass their shadows stretch across the wall. The shadows' umbrellas dig and dig at the sky, and once they have dug all the rain out, she sees a shape that makes her sit up. Perhaps it is

a police helmet? The helmet crosses the road towards her house, and once it has reached her front step it turns into a shovel resting on the shoulder of Jack. Beside him the boy, looking half-drowned, is covered all over in sand.

When Jack comes in he says, "Oh, Harry's a coward. He started crying and would not go to his aunty."

The boy is silent.

### JACK

The memory of her will not be buried, and the boy has gone to Italian people up the road. On my first night alone I am kept awake by an image of my wife unbuttoning her blouse—perhaps reluctantly, but at least she's finally doing it.

### HENRIETTA

Jack makes a point of standing before her while she's doing the mending to declare in her boarders' presence that everything is fine. The boy's mother has written, she is working in a hotel over in North Sydney. She needs time apart to get her head straight and try to get off the drink, that's all.

As he speaks, he seems to be waiting for Henrietta to breathe out, or nod, or give some other sign of approval. But she doesn't. She's sick of coming home to find perfectly good things smashed to smithereens, or burnt, or drenched. The man is disruptive on a Biblical scale. She doesn't need his money so badly that she has to put up with Jack and his ghosts, chasing each other through her house. She simply says, "Oh", and prays that peace will soon be restored.

But peace is not soon restored. Her trips to the barracks are unsettling her nerves. The soldiers all look the same. They could have been put together in a factory, those lizard-green killing machines. She can't stop thinking about what they are doing to her son right now at the camp. And then there's her husband, spending his nights drinking with Jack. And the price of butter. And the ghosts stalking her mad tenant through the house, shuddering up the pipes when she sleeps. She can hear Jack muttering to them in his room, sometimes so loudly she wakes up.

On one occasion she runs into Jack in the hall as he flees from his room. He is quivering with terror, his hair tousled, his eyes red.

"Madam, madam, I think the room is haunted. I am haunted," he says.

A part of her wants to calm him down. Another part of her—the weary, sleep-deprived part—has become as ruthless as those lizard-soldiers up in Paddington. *This is your chance*, that side of her thinks, *to exorcise your house*.

She looks him in the eye. "I think your wife is haunting you," she says. "I think you killed her."

---

**JACK**

At my new job, bodies swing off hooks, smooth and almost elegant. They have no heads.

The floor is littered with cigarette butts, swelling with blood like gorged leeches. Smoking helps mask the smell. But after the second or third day, the smell of blood and fat becomes sweet and almost metallic. A smell I could get used to.

The carcasses come out of the coolroom on hooks. Headless, armless, they are the colour of candlewax, mostly, and glow a bluish-pink.

It's January, and even the high ceilings of the meatworks don't release the heat. Flies stick to our mouths. We shake our heads, but the flies turn a few circles in the air and come back.

The hooks hold the carcasses by the ankle joint, between the two long bones of the leg. Sometimes a hook gets caught up in tendon or membrane. The hook doesn't pierce all the way through, and the membrane stretches over the rusty metal. When that happens, I shove the heel of my hand against the joint, so the membrane splits. It's a satisfying feeling.

We hug every third or fourth carcass. Our ears press against the pig's thighs, our arms wrap around the haunch, the nook between our necks and shoulders lock against the meat. Braced like this, we walk the carcasses out of the cool room, and into the butchery.

The first time I walk in the procession of carcasses, I have the feeling I've been here before. It's the coldness of the skin. The touch of a woman who doesn't know how to love.

**HENRIETTA**

After being woken up again by Jack's mutterings, she stares steadily at the ceiling and tells her husband she can't stand it any more.

Her husband rolls to face her. "The detectives," he whispers.

"What? Did they come?"

"They could have. Looking for him."

"Ah!" she kisses her husband on the forehead, the cheek, both curls of his moustache.

"You are a genius, Herr Schieblich. This is why I married you."

**JACK**

She is everywhere. She is sitting three rows ahead of me on the ferry. She is buying a pound of sugar at the grocers in a suburb I never thought she'd visit. Wisps of women's hair fly up under the brims of their hats, the way hers used to. I see the flash of a green coat tailored sharply into a waist as small as hers. These things make me realise how often I think of her.

Then I really see her. She is standing outside Luna Park with the boy. I walk towards her with my hat in my hands. She's standing beneath the giant face's open mouth. The face's eyes are watching her and the boy, as if it is about to wrap them up in its tongue, and swallow them whole.



She sees me and grips the boy's arm. The boy is bigger than me now. Amazing how fast they grow.

"Hello," she says. Her mouth has new lines around it; her neck is as shiny as scalded skin.

### HENRIETTA

Telling Jack about the detectives is easier than she thought. All she has to do is pull the same straight face she pulled for the insurance men when they came to inspect the ashes of their house in Toowoomba.

She waits until after Jack has paid his week's rent, then knocks on his door.

"Jack," she whispers through the door.

"*Whaisit?*" he says. He sounds drunk.

"The men you said about—the broad-shouldered men. They came looking for you."

"*Whishmen?*" he says; then, snapping out of it, "Which men?"

"The detectives. They came just this morning, asking about a man who had come to stay with his stepson."

Jack opens the door. Now she has to lie looking him directly in the eye. The calm this gives her—a thrilling calm, the way one feels after climbing to the peak of a mountain—is surprising to her. She will soon be free. He is not her problem. When he slams the door in her face, and begins to rip the linen off the bed and hurl his belongings into boxes, his distress is nothing for her to worry about. And when, the next day, her other boarders begin to pack, when they nervously make apologies on their way out her front door, she is still calm, although colder now, and a little confused. They must have been told something, and the only clue is what Miss Johnson says, as she hastily pins her hat into place at the front door: "I know you are different to the rest of them. I'm sorry."

When two detectives eventually come to 103 Cathedral Street, asking if the collaborationist Herr Schieblich is in the house, she steps back, and lets them take him. She has not been sleeping. She has been walking through the days as if she is asleep. She has been having visions, premonitions, strange fancies. They seep into her consciousness, are whispered through the creaks and groans of the house. She does not ask who reported her husband; she already knows. She does not protest—as she would have only a few months before—that he only said the things he said to feel alive and dangerous, the way his music used to make him feel. She steps back and watches them take him. Hadn't she invented these men herself? Hadn't she almost wanted them to come?

### JACK

I leave the German woman's house for a small cottage in North Sydney. Here, I have Daisy all to myself. I run circles around her. Get up before her. Get the breakfast things out before the sun comes in through the window. And when I come home, I bring off-cuts from the meat-

works and cook her chops in extra fat. I don't want her to lift a finger, so she doesn't. She stops going to work. She sleeps in. She is tired all the time.

When I come home from work my hair is hard with blood and my cheeks are sticky with fat. She won't kiss me like that. We go through five boxes of soap that summer, and I have to spend at least an hour after work each day soaking in water so hot it turns my skin red.

The first night Daisy lets me touch her again she says she'll have to be drunk. I take two tin mugs down from their hooks and fill them up to the brim with straight whisky. We sit on the edge of the bed in silence, sipping and wincing at the sharpness of the booze. When she's sipped her way through a quarter of the mug, I put my hand on her knee. She flinches slightly, but leaves it there. I pull the mug away from her mouth, and hold her hands in my own. She's forgotten the feeling of my hands touching hers. The gentle electricity of it.

I stand up to turn out the light.

"No, leave it on," she says.

I pull her by the ankles so that she falls flat on her back in the bed, her whisky spilling, filling the room with the smell of smoke. We are heady with it.

I draw patterns up and down her inner thigh, coil her pubic hair around my little finger, bring the juices of her cunt up to my nose. God, I've missed this. Her hips carve figure-eights in the mattress as I trace smaller ones with my tongue between her legs. She begins to shudder. I make my fist into the shape of a bud, and ease it inside her. I pull my head out from under her skirts. She is unbuttoning her blouse, unhooking her corset. Then—

I stop moving. There, in the centre of her chest is a pit. I'd never noticed this when we made love before. I touch it. It's cold, and feels as if the walls of the cavity were made of bone. At the bottom of the cavity the skin is blue. The colour moves like a gas flame. I look up at her face. She smiles. Toothless. The way her tongue moves between the ridges of her gums looks like a red leech, blindly testing the air for warmth.

"Yeth, thomeome burmp my hearp oup. Burmp i' righ' ou of my chesp."

She throws her head back and laughs.

Afterwards, I watch her sleep. It's the only time I can look at her without making her flinch. Through the water and the curve of the glass jar beside the bed, her teeth look huge, but also kind of crooked. Each tooth is traced with a fine black line. Her gums are turning black, too. All that sugar and brandy she hides in her tea is rotting her from within.

Even in her sleep she is gripping her jaw, and the skin around her eyes is tight. The scar on her temple is purple, like a mark on a rind of pork, and rises up off her face.

I can keep her with me, run circles around her, but I can never make her love me. When she speaks to me, if she is ever up before I leave for work, she sounds distant, as if her spirit wants to be somewhere she can only ever visit in her sleep.

I've killed her. I really have. I've killed what it was in her that loved me in the first place.

# THE BACHELOR

SUMMER, 1917

## EMMA BELBIN

For Emma Belbin the summer of 1917 was a summer of beer parties, learning the foxtrot, and momentarily forgetting how bored she was at home. It was a summer that raced forward, but not from underneath her as other summers had—it carried her along, so that she was fully alive and inside every second as it heeled-and-toed into the next. It was the summer she became close with Lydia's friend Harry Crawford and—energised by loud, loose songs sung around strangers' pianos—managed to charm him out of the funk his wife had left him in.

Yes, she had gotten Harry Crawford drunk on more than one occasion (only sometimes by filling his glass when he wasn't looking) and they had often found themselves sitting in the corner of a kitchen in the early hours of the morning, plumbing their souls for sad stories worth sharing.

Sometimes Emma's husband came to these beer parties, and sometimes he didn't. Emma preferred it when he didn't. He would only stand awkwardly in the corner, holding his beer glass too high up against his chest, looking as if his trousers were constricting his testicles. He would look at her as she talked to Crawford, and worry about how the two of them looked. Then she would have to spend the whole walk home explaining that they were only close friends, that Mr Crawford was still very much in love with his wife, that she, Emma, was nothing more than a shoulder to cry on.

When her husband wasn't there, Emma let her shoulder be a little more available for tears. And when Harry Crawford told her he could not take his wife back, even if she begged him, Emma did notice something flutter up inside her, like a racing pigeon released from its box. But she quickly trapped and smothered it, in case its feathers should fall from her eyes and he should see. No, theirs was not a friendship like that.

They sat in the corner, knees facing in towards each other, a bowl of peanuts balancing between. They nibbled and talked and reached for the nuts without even looking; they were so absorbed by the picture show of each other's lives. They had arrived at a kind of deep, sedimentary truth together, accessible only by the brutally honest conversation of best friends.

She told him how, after six months of marriage, when Mr Belbin was grunting away on top of her, she realised with a shock that the oceans of his eyes were more like puddles, and the caves of his soul that she had thought so mysterious were no deeper than pot holes in a poorly maintained road. They were not filled with mystery, but with images of her husband: sitting in an armchair, reading the results of the boxing in the paper, smoking a pipe. *Is this it?* she had thought. *Is this the rest of my life?*

She could say these things to Crawford. She could be crass and horrible and he would understand. His eyes as they listened changed their colour—from hazel, to blue, to grey—as if they were windows into an underwater cave lined with the smooth undersides of shells.

When she finished speaking, he would tell her about his wife, how much she drank, how he was never good enough for her. Emma was always slightly disappointed he never went into the same level of detail as she did for him, but she had to remember he was a man. It was a wonder he was talking about his feelings at all.

After their deepest conversations, Emma would need the walk home, to turn over the secret feelings that had been dug out of her guts and decide which she would ignore, and which she would return to later in her daydreams. She would arrive home to find her husband asleep on his favourite armchair, fold up his newspaper, pick up his dropped pipe from the floor, and try not to catch herself thinking: *What if he fell asleep when his pipe was still lit? Perhaps he would burn to death.*

#### LYDIA PARNELL

He had seen her, he said when he was barely inside Lydia's front gate. He had seen her. Flush-faced—maybe even a little drunk—outside the Palais de Danse on George Street. She'd had her arm around the shoulders of another man, but when she saw him, she quickly took her arm away, adjusted her hair, and walked towards him, swinging her strumpety hips. From five yards away he could smell the gin on her breath. And—as if the sight of her wasn't enough of a shock—she had the hide to ask him for money. Clearly things had not worked out in North Sydney with that plumber of hers and now she was reduced to this: earning her living doing the lame duck or the tango to some hokey rag, charming pennies out of men with every flick of the head. He told her he did not want any conversation with her and she asked him for money and he said he had not any to give her and he jumped on a tram and left her standing there. Of course the sight of her shrinking into the distance had pained him, especially after the two worried months he'd spent imagining all the things that might have happened to her. But it was not as bad as it could have been, didn't she think?

"Yes," Lydia, said. She supposed so. Though she found it hard to imagine Mrs Crawford doing the lame duck. She found it hard to imagine that gangly woman dancing at all.

Lydia and Crawford stood on the front path, blinking at each other. Now that the mystery of his missing wife was so easily resolved, there was nothing much else to say. Everything seemed less urgent, less real.

Work in Manly had been good.

George was good.

Lydia coughed.

He did not have time to stay long, he said, but he had just wanted to tell her how overjoyed he was.

Well, overjoyed was the wrong word. How relieved he was.

He laughed like a man at the end of a film. The dark made a circle around his face, and closed in.

# THE MASQUERADER

WINTER, 1920

LILY NUGENT

Lily had been meaning to contact her nephew for three years, but things had gotten in the way, and now here he was of his own volition: a grown man sitting on the edge of her day-couch, making it look too small.

Harry held his teacup as if it might crumble to dust at any moment, and spoke softly, careful not to blow it away with his breath. Since 1917, his mother had vanished without a trace; his stepfather had tried to push him off a cliff and bury him alive. Lily looked down at her limp hands resting in her lap. Why had these hands not sought her nephew's address? Written him a letter? Seeing him now—sitting in the seat his mother had once sat in, drinking from a cup she had drunk from—Lily flushed with shame. She had been angry at her sister, not this boy. It was her sister who had always been so impressionable; it was her sister who had stayed with that monster.

“If you will not shake Crawford off, goodbye and good luck,” is what Lily had said to her the last time she visited, in 1917.

Now, three years later, her nephew's face had Annie's refined angles. The poor thing must have been reminded of his mother every time he looked in the mirror. How could it possibly have taken him three years to start searching for her? Never mind, he was here now, and that was what mattered. They must put guilt and blame aside, roll up their sleeves, and take a practical approach.

First, she had to see if he knew about his mother. About the way she was.

“Harry, there's something you need to know,” she said, putting her hands to use by straightening out the kinks in her skirt. “Something about your mother.”

Harry looked up from his cup.

“Some time in 1917, your mother wrote me a letter saying she had something to tell me. About your stepfather, how he was not—”

Oddly enough the boy nodded. Perhaps he had been in on it after all.

“Do you know?”

“Yep.” He spoke out the side of his mouth the way Crawford had done. The boy had been shaped into a man by that freak of nature. The scenario did her head in. “That’s why I’m here, Aunt Lily. You always knew what to do.”

### HARRY BIRKETT

They’d been saying the rains were about to come for days now, but tonight, by the look of the bruised, swollen thunderclouds rolling in from the west, Harry would believe it. He had been standing by the lamppost for an hour now. It had taken him three years to find out where Crawford worked, a week to pay a visit to Richardson’s Hotel, and now it was taking him an hour just to cross the street. Yes, the rains were definitely on their way, but Harry stayed where he was, looked at the sky, looked in the window of the warm pub over the road, and talked himself into moving.

Soon, he told himself. Soon.

The horses trotting down George Street were tetchy in the premature dark. Drivers were cracking their whips more than usual. Or maybe it was Harry who was on edge. Either way, he couldn’t stand out here on the street forever. He would wait for that tram to pass. And the next. And then he would cross.

Two trams passed. Then a third. A drop of rain hit the middle of the road and Harry crossed.

The roar inside the pub, and the boozy sweat coming off what had to be at least fifty men made Harry calmer.

“Yeah?” one of the bar staff said to Harry.

Harry blinked. “Sorry?”

Four of them, the bar staff, were staring at him like gargoyles. “Get you something or what?”

“Johnnie Walker,” Harry said. “Two.” He did not really drink the stuff, but tonight would be different.

Over in the corner of the room was a table, recently vacated, and leaning over it a man—short, wiry, forty-five maybe, and still in his jacket despite the humidity. He was collecting glasses, stacking them into a tower nestled into the crook of his elbow. The glasses wavered above his head, first to the right, then to the left, and Harry rushed towards them, but they did not fall.

“Crawford,” Harry said, gripping the glass at the top of the stack. Harry was a lot taller, or Crawford had shrunk. Crawford looked bad, anyway. Like the air had been let out of him.

“You look good, mate,” Harry said. “You been well?”

Crawford laughed, thank God, and Harry laughed too. He could not help it. He was tall now. He was a man. But he felt as if he was still playing at being a man; as if his bones were two sizes bigger than he was used to.

He lifted the scotches. “Johnnie Walker. Got one for you, too.”

Crawford stared at the drinks. “Well I’m working, so I can’t, but thank you.” He was getting dodderly. “It’s just, I’m working,” he kept saying. “I’m working.”

"It's alright," Harry said, placing a hand on the man's shoulder. "See if you can get a ciggie break? Meet you out the front?"

"Sure," Crawford said. He laughed again, and shook his head. "Jesus Christ, Harry, it's been such a long time."

Outside, the rain was feathering down onto the street. Taking its time, like it had a long time to take.

Crawford lit Harry a cigarette. Lit one for himself, too, and sucked the end of his fag as if it was filling him with life. Glinting on the ring finger of his smoking hand—four-fingered now—was a gold wedding band.

"You got a new missus, Crawford?" Harry asked as casually as he could.

Crawford pulled the hand away, covered the ring up with his thumb, but he was smiling. He seemed unable to help it. "Lizzie," he said. "My Lizzie. She's a good egg."

They both smoked, and stared into the rain, and were glad their cigarettes gave them something to do with their hands. Harry could see where he had been standing just a few minutes before, on the other side of the street. Now he was standing right inside the moment he had been both yearning for and dreading, for three years.

"Hey, Crawford," Harry said. "I was wondering if you'd heard anything more about Mum?"

Crawford took a drag of his cigarette, shut his eyes, and shook his head ever so slightly, like he was trying his hardest to hold something inside him down.

"I'm sorry for asking," Harry said. "I know you took it pretty hard when she left."

"Nah, it's fine." Crawford said. But it wasn't. Crawford still had his eyes shut, and he was breathing slow. Even and slow.

Harry didn't ask anything more; he simply stood and smoked, and when Crawford opened his eyes, Harry saw that his face was wet—with rain or tears, he couldn't be sure.

"Why don't you come back tomorrow, Harry, when it isn't so busy? I'd like to talk. It'd like that very much."

But when Harry came back the next day, Crawford had already quit.

### LIZZIE CRAWFORD

For weeks, water poured out of the sky. A bridge near Newcastle had broken under the pressure. Farms out west were sliding clean off the sides of hills, taking roads and train tracks with them. In country towns, umbrellas could not stay up for longer than a minute, and men were left to wade across the wide streets with their coats up over their heads, looking like nervous, waterlogged geese. Although the weather had been bleak in Sydney, it had not been quite so Biblical as it had out in the sticks. The rain simply made the trams late, their breaks squeak, and was used as an excuse—by those who sought one—to stay in bed.

On the morning of Monday the fifth of July, however, the deluge above the little house at 47 Durham Street, Stanmore paused, and a chink of blue was visible through the Crawfords'



lace curtains. The sun tugged at Mrs Lizzie Crawford—*Go out doors! Go out doors!*—and she felt buoyant, full of life in a way she never had in all her fifty years of living.

Her husband was asleep. The parrots outside the bedroom window were tipsy and shrill with sun, and he slept through their shrieks so peacefully she could not bring herself to do anything other than sit on the bed and watch the miracle of his nose, his mouth, his rising chest breathe.

He was curled on his side, his right, four-fingered hand under his left cheek. Lizzie was still stunned by him and his unearthly effect on her. They had been married for eight months now and the stillness she'd felt at the registry office had grown within her to the size of a cathedral. It was a stillness so large that it encompassed her husband, too. He'd been a prickly little man when he'd handed her his first timesheet at the Coogee Bay Hotel—wounded by a cold-hearted woman who had left him, a woman she had never dared ask about. But, like an artichoke, underneath his prickles hid a tender heart and she believed she was the only woman who knew how to find it.

And find it she did. Eight months into her marriage, there it was: a decent, caring, tender heart that flourished in the light of her radiant love.

At her request, he stopped drinking. And when he made love to her, he focused his attentions not on his own pleasure, but on the magical conversion of her body into many unpredictable things. Sometimes it was the city at night seen from above—some streets flickering out, some surging with white light. Sometimes it was as if all her pores were wincing at the taste of sherbet. Sometimes she felt nothing but a spark on the roof of her mouth. Sometimes she wanted to swear loudly and kick, as if she were possessed. But she never told him any of this, because he was so painfully modest. Like a dream, love-making was an otherworldly experience to be had in the dark, under the covers, and never spoken of in the light of day.

Because of this crippling shyness, Lizzie was not sure how to tell her husband that their love had sparked new life in her old but not-yet-withered womb. As she watched him wake, she wondered if she should tell him at all.

She held onto her news as she made him breakfast, as she ironed his shirt. She let the news tickle her on the lips until she lent in to kiss him good-bye at their front gate and she couldn't hold it back any longer.

“We're having a baby, love. Isn't that wonderful? Did you ever think we would?”

He did not throw his arms around her neck as she had hoped he would. Instead, he stiffened. Lizzie stepped back, held his face in her hands so that she might read it. He had a confused look, as if he did not understand how it worked—people growing inside of other people, coming out of them somehow.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, pecking her on the cheek. “Just late for work.”

He adjusted his hat, shot her a look from underneath the brim that said, *I wonder who he is?* then turned and walked to work for the last time in their short married life.

## JOSEPHINE DEANGELIS

If there was one thing Josephine DeAngelis knew, it was how to catch a sailor. She didn't know how to hold onto one, but she absolutely knew how to catch one, and that was the first step. The Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League's events at the Palais de Danse on George Street were always the best bet for catching sailors. But in terms of holding onto them, the problem was either you didn't sleep with them and they lost interest, or you did and then they wouldn't foot the bill when it came time to get rid of what they'd left up inside you.

As she got more experience, Josephine became a better judge of who might stay caught once he was caught. She just had to avoid free-falling into a man's eyes within the first five seconds of meeting him. That was always the worst, when you fell in love too hard and too fast. Then there was no getting up off your back until they left.

This time things would be different, because Arthur Whitby was The One. Josephine could tell. The sound of her name and his together sounded so nice, repeated over and over in her head (*Jo-se-phine Whit-by, Jo-se-phine Whit-by, Jo-se-phine Whit-by*) and spiralled her across the floor of the Palais de Danse with the help of a positively electrified band. Those horns. Just, wow. They turned her blood into gold glitter the minute their notes hit her ears.

She hadn't even needed a pick-me-up before hitting the floor with Arthur. He was a seaman in the Royal Australian Navy, that was pick-me-up enough. Maybe one day he would be a captain ... and maybe she would be his wife! Well, why not? She was fearless and exciting and the best out of everyone at the foxtrot.

Josephine and Arthur spun to the side of the hall, panting, but not looking away from each other for a second. "DO YOU KNOW MY FATHER?" she shouted to him over the drum solo. "WHAT?" he shouted back as he handed the barman change for two sticky drinks. "HE IS A FAMOUS SEA CAPTAIN," she said, "CAPTAIN MARTELLO." Arthur threw back his drink. "NO, I DON'T KNOW THE TARANTELLA, SORRY LOVE," he said, and spun her back out into the floor again, with Josephine thinking, *Love, love, Oh my God, he called me love.*

Josephine's steps became longer and looser as the night spiralled on, but if she ever lost the rhythm of the band, she simply closed her eyes and let the music play her from the inside, as if her skeleton and all her internal organs were an instrument only the horn section knew how to play. And Arthur, of course. He knew how to play her exceptionally well, considering they'd only met one hour and forty minutes ago. He lead and she followed without one mis-step, and it felt, to Josephine, as if the whole world was watching, as if all the women in the room were jealously whispering behind their hands, because she had undoubtedly done it. She had nabbed the best looking Navy man in the place, and he was going to take her out for ice-cream afterwards.

But once the dancing had finished it was too cold for ice-cream. It was bitter, in fact, and George Street had turned into a river of mud, too filthy for walking, so Josephine thought, *Why not, just this once* (though it had happened before with other, less gorgeous men) *let him escort me home in a cab, and walk me up to my front door?* So with a wink of an eye and a flick of his head Arthur hailed a hansom cab for the two of them.

By the time they had reached her door his kisses had proved more delicious than she had first thought. His hands inside the placket of her skirt gave her the feeling of stepping into a hot bath after a long day at the factory and every part of her let go, saying, *Yes, more of that, oh please more of that.*

She tried to be quiet with the front door of the boarding house, but it was hard getting the key in the lock when all the cells of her body were still doing the foxtrot, and Arthur was kissing her right up the back of her neck.

“Josephine!” rasped a woman on the other side of the door, when she had finally thumped it open. It was the landlady, her hair in a mussed-up plait for sleeping. Josephine kicked Arthur backwards out of the door and straightened up, but the woman did not give two hoots about the drunk man who was feeling up her tenant. There were more pressing issues at hand.

“A detective was here again, Josephine. He wants to talk to you about your mother. Urgently.”

Josephine’s blood lost all traces of glitter and booze. “Arthur!” she ripped his hand off the back of her skirt. “Arthur! I’m sorry, darling, but I need you to help me.” His eyes were wide, and she could see in them the flash of fear she had seen in all the others, towards the end of her love affairs. This time, though, the help she required of her beau would demand less of his heart, soul or salary, so she did not feel so terrible asking him for it.

“I need you to help me move,” she said. “Tonight.”

### EDUARD SCHIEBLICH

Standing to attention in front of the camp hospital in dungarees that have never been washed, with no undergarments on, and a rash on his left testicle he desperately wants to scratch, Herr Schiebllich is about to burst. He can sleep on a mattress thrown over some rough-hewn logs he had to fell himself; he can sleep in a room with fifty other snoring Germans, Austrians, and Australians of socialist persuasion; he is prepared to share one lantern between ten men, and defecate in a group latrine with no partitions separating him from a man with diarrhoea. He has already planned to forget how Otto, who he first met on the ship to Australia, died within his first twenty-four hours in Liverpool Internment Camp after being shot in the knee by one of the guards for no apparent reason. But the Great War is over. The Great War has been over for almost two years now and he is still locked up in Liverpool. He cannot stand not knowing when he can return to his wife. He cannot even write her a candid letter. He is only allowed to send two letters a week—each no longer than one hundred and fifty words in length—which will be opened, read and guffawed at by the guards. He is only allowed to see his wife in person once every two weeks between the hours of two and four on Sunday, and even then the guard present steers the conversation away from his concerns like a cautious cab driver steering a horse around a turd. And how Henrietta must miss the strength of his opinion! He saw how timid she could be as she stepped out into the streets of Woolloomooloo to take the boarders’ whites to the laundry. Each day she stood in the doorway, looked up the street and back, and sometimes would not step out onto the footpath for three whole minutes. She

moved so slowly through their house, it was as if they lived six leagues under the sea—but instead of water, the sea was made out of all the possible decisions Henrietta could make, floating around her, tangling in her hair and making the cotton of her skirts cling to her legs. At the end of the day, Herr Schieblich would sit next to her in front of the fuel stove as her slow hand passed a needle and thread through their residents' frayed clothes. Frau Schieblich would sew, look up, think, and sew, while Herr Schieblich read between the lines of a collection of papers, tied the loose ends of his deduced facts together and wove them into a flawless verisimilitude of the current state of the world. Or he would practice his violin, stop, turn to her, share his latest theory before digging the bow back into a stormy Beethoven sonata. He kept talking, even when he knew that the connections he made between the ideas he shared were tenuously held together. But what Henrietta didn't know was that his assurance in his knowledge of the world was a performance he put on to give her strength. He should have known that it was not wise to act too certain about sensitive political topics when their boarding house was full of spies. He should never have got drunk with Jack that night, especially not to the point that he felt loose enough to say Germany was in every respect at least equal, if not superior to, England. Or that, in spite of the German strength and power we bowed our head for twenty-five years before England, and kept quiet when Russia and England divided up Persia and the whole north coast of Africa. Or that Egypt and Morocco had been divided up between England and France, with a little strip for Italy, while all we got, as compensation, was a slight enlargement of Cameroon. And he most definitely should not have said, after the sixth or seventh scotch, that a second war would follow because if anything could breed revenge, it was this.

Now the phrase haunts him.

When the guard takes and drinks the pint of black-market kölsch beer that Henrietta had brought to the camp from Woolloomooloo, when Henrietta's eyes turn down towards her shoes at the sight of the guard drinking what cost her a week's worth of groceries, as if blaming herself for making the wrong set of decisions that day, Herr Schieblich thinks: if anything could breed revenge, it is this.

But now the guard is busy skolling the beer, and his wife is whispering to him—"Eduard, Jack Crawford has been arrested, and I have been asked to appear in court."

Herr Schieblich sighs. Perhaps that is revenge enough, for now.

## JANE WIGG

Mrs Wigg opened the door to the crown of a rakishly angled fedora and a slate-blue, broad-shouldered suit, and thought, *Oh hello! Won't this make an interesting story for the eisteddfod committee meeting this evening?* The hat tilted back to reveal the serious face of a man who required serious information—this was no ordinary door-to-door salesman, this was someone important.

"Good afternoon," the man said, taking off his hat. "My name is Detective Watkins, might you be a Mrs Jane Wigg?"

A chill crept over her skin then, from the base of her neck—a chill born of genuine concern. What on earth did one offer a detective for afternoon tea? Poundcake? Honey jumbles?

“I’m sorry,” Detective Watkins said, squatting slightly to lift up her troubled gaze with his own. “I haven’t caught you at a bad time, have I?”

“Oh no!” She stepped backwards into the house, “Please! Come in.” At the moment of retreat it came to her: a selection of fish-paste sandwiches, teacake and arrowroot biscuits would be the wisest selection for a detective: not too showy, nutritionally comprehensive.

“Please make yourself comfortable in our parlour,” she announced, indicating the kitchen.

After placing the afternoon tea in front of the detective, she turned the plate around as brazenly as one might spin a roulette wheel, so that the teacake (her signature cake) was facing him. Mrs Wigg perched on the edge of her chair, with her knees twisted away from the detective as she had been taught, and asked delicately, “Detective, how may I help you?” (*Ten points!* cheered the eisteddfod committee. *What a talented hostess!*)

The detective pulled up his trousers at the knees, leaned forward, and selected a fish-paste sandwich. He chewed quickly at first, then paused as if his tongue had discovered something illegal hidden between the slices of bread. A tooth? Or a limb? He swallowed hard.

“Is it stale, Detective?”

“No! Fish paste!” he coughed, and tried to smile. “I thought it was chocolate butter, silly me!”

Mrs Wigg was horrified. Fish paste! What was she thinking! “I’m sorry, Detective, it must have been quite the shock.” At that moment she felt for him the way she had felt backstage after last year’s eisteddfod, seeing the minstrel performers wipe the black off their skin—how inferior their talent for singing suddenly seemed.

Detective Watkins placed the rest of the sandwich on the coffee table for them both to keep an eye on, in case it leapt off its plate and swam around the room.

“Mrs Wigg, I am here to talk to you about the man-woman.”

Mrs Wigg laughed. “Pardon, the what?”

“The man-woman. Have you not heard of her? She is in all the papers.”

“Oh,” she said. So he *was* a salesman. What a foolish woman she had been, to endow his slate-blue suit with such inflated importance. “You are a gentleman from the circus, aren’t you, come to sell me a ticket?”

“No, Mrs Wigg, I promise you I am a detective of the police.”

Mrs Wigg did not want to hear it. She had already been shamed by her husband after purchasing radium pills and blood tonic from a man who looked the spitting image of a doctor. Her work on the eisteddfod committee was making her believe in first impressions, talent, magic tricks. It was exciting to believe in these things. To live a cynical life was to live like Mr Wigg, always grumbling sensible facts at a newspaper effervescent with sensation. But she was not going to be played for a fool so easily by this charlatan detective. The detective was reaching into his pocket, no doubt taking out a ticket book for a quack travelling freakshow of trickery and fat women with beards. She stood up, ready to send him on his way, when he pulled from his pocket not a ticket book, but a police badge. It was police-grey—the colour of gaol terms and bullets. Too dull to be a prop, too ordinary. Mrs Wigg sat back down.

“Do you remember Mr Crawford, your neighbour at number five?” the Detective asked her.

“Yes, of course.”

“And did you notice anything odd about him, Mrs Wigg?”

Mrs Wigg wanted to answer yes, so that she would not seem unobservant. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“What did you notice?”

“Well,” she said slowly, “his wife seemed tall, so I suppose that would mean he was short.”

“Right,” Detective Watkins said, shaking the cuff of his sleeve back from his wrist in preparation to write. “What else?”

“Ah—”

“Did you overhear anything at all?”

“Overhear anything?”

“Yes—any rows or anything like that?”

“I heard a few groans coming from the house in the night.”

“Yes?”

“And once I heard a little scream, and then a door slam.”

“But did you notice anything in particular about Mr Crawford?”

“About his ... ?” she leaned forward, hoping he would finish her question so that she might better know how to answer it, but the detective was not playing. He sat back in his chair.

“This is not a school exam, Mrs Wigg. It’s alright to admit you noticed nothing at all.”

He spoke in the same weary tone of her high school maths teacher when he insisted that an hypotenuse was not, as Jane then believed, an African animal that lived in a swamp. Yes, now that she put her mind to it, she could remember the rumours that circulated in 1917, about Mrs Crawford going about with other men. About her penchant for plumbers. She remembered the last time she saw Mrs Crawford, too. She was carrying nothing but a small suitcase, and walking arm in arm with Mr Crawford in the direction of the tram. Funny behaviour for a woman planning to run away with a tradesman, now that she thought about it.

“Can you describe the suitcase for me, Mrs Wigg?”

“Well it was a small square case.”

“Did it look oriental at all?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Well perhaps a little.”

“Almost Japanese?”

“Yes, perhaps it was a little bit Japanese.”

“Thank you, Mrs Wigg,” and the detective wrote down some more notes.

As the detective walked towards the door, she felt relaxed enough to ask him, “Detective, what does this have to do with the man-woman?”

“You do know that Mr Crawford is not Mr Crawford at all, don’t you Mrs Wigg?” the Detective asked.

“Oh?”

“Mr Crawford is an Italian woman called Eugenia Falleni.”

“What?”

---

“Are you seriously telling me you never suspected?”

“My Lord,” Mrs Wigg said, and leaned very quickly against the wall. For a full nine months she had lived next door to a pair of sapphists and hadn’t even known. Mrs Wigg remembered the groaning house, and the little scream, and flushed. Now that she thought about it, Mr Crawford never wore a five o’clock shadow at five o’clock, nor any other time either. And he walked as if he had something to prove. And he had a funny swing to his arm, like he was a child playing the role of a sailor in a play. *My God*, she thought, *am I so easily fooled?*

Yes, my girl. Yes, you are.

**NINA FALLEN**

**OR, THE WRONG DAUGHTER**



# DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

## SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

### DOUBLE BAY

**Mrs (Granny) DeAngelis:** owner of 'the Italian Laundry'.

**Mr DeAngelis:** husband of Mrs DeAngelis.

**Josephine DeAngelis:** adopted granddaughter of Mrs DeAngelis.

**Nina:** Mother of Josephine, employee at the Italian Laundry.

### WOOLLOOMOOLOO

**Marcelina Bombelli:** Resident at 156 Cathedral St. Mother of Frank Bombelli and short term carer for Harry Birkett.

## DOUBLE BAY, 1898

### GRANNY DEANGELIS

It was late in the night when the girl came to Granny's door. It was a cold night—there was a wind whipping right off the bay. She was standing on the front steps in a big coat, and her belly was out here like *this*, like she had swallowed the moon. The girl was pregnant and the baby had hands and hair and fingernails already. She had been pregnant for seven months and Granny thought to herself: *No, this is not the daughter I was promised.*

Granny knew the girl's mother back in Wellington. Isola had sent the girl here because the Lord did not give Granny any children. He gave Isola so many, but he did not give Granny even one. The girl, Nina, she was five daughters for the price of one. She was too much daughter for Isola and so she sent her to Sydney to help out in the DeAngelis's laundry.

Granny foolishly thought, *How kind of Isola, giving away her oldest girl like this.* But when Nina turned up, pregnant, and with short hair, short as a boy's, she saw that she was not her girl either. She would never be anyone's girl.

"Mrs DeAngelis?" she said. "Is that you?"

"Yes Dear," Granny said, but Nina did not come inside, she only stood there and burst into tears. She had saved up every tear from her life for this night, it seemed like to Granny, and now they were fighting each other, trying to come out first.

"I have to get rid of the baby," Nina said through her tears. "I cannot look after a baby."

Granny folded the girl up into a blanket and when she did she could feel the baby move. This is the daughter God promised me, Granny thought. She is still growing hair and eyelashes and toenails. She is the girl inside the girl.

Sitting by the stove, sipping coffee, Nina did not say anything for some time. She only sat on the stool, with the blanket wrapped around her and stared at the glass of the window. Her eyes did not look out the window, it was like they were two birds thumping against the glass.

"Who is the father? Maybe he can help pay?" Granny asked.

The girl sipped the coffee and looked at Granny, but did not say anything. Granny thought: she must be heart-broken, with him so far away.

When the coffee was all gone and the stove was out Granny took the girl to her bed. She told Mr DeAngelis, "Get up, you're sleeping on the floor," and he said, "What? Sleep on the what? In my own house?" And Granny said, "You have not paid a penny for any of this, it is my house and if I say the girl is sleeping in the bed she is sleeping in the bed." So Mr DeAngelis went and slept on the floor like a dog.

Nina barely even touched the bed before she fell asleep; she must have walked such a long way to bring Granny her new daughter. When the girl and the baby were all tucked in, Granny took her coat and clothes to the laundry and looked in the pockets for the money Isola had promised her, but there was nothing there.

Even though Granny gave Nina her own bed, she was up every night, having hot baths and doing handstands against the wall, and one night Granny found her vomiting into the chamber pot after drinking half a bottle of whisky, but she put up with it because she knew her daughter was coming in the end. She had held fast for so long, there was nothing Nina could do to shake her out now.

Another night Granny found her with her head bent down between her legs. She had a knitting needle bent into a hook, and she was using it to poke up inside herself.

"Stop!" Granny shouted at her. "Do not hurt my baby!"

Granny took the knitting needle away from her. There was no blood, but even so she crossed herself, crossed the baby in Nina's stomach, and left Nina for Our Lady to judge.

"Just send me to the home!" Nina said. "I can't keep the child and neither can you!"

Mr DeAngelis stood behind Granny in the hall, and shouted along with the girl, "I don't want another mouth to feed!"

"What are you talking about?" Granny said to him. "It's my laundry, I run the business—what do you do but scratch your scrotum and spit into the cabbages?"

"I don't want another man's baby here!" he said. "Send the girl to St Margaret's!" But Granny did no such thing. She knew what would happen. Those frigid women, they'd take the baby and sell her to make money.

When the baby was born it was a beautiful night. The full moon popped out from behind a cloud just as the baby came screaming out of the girl. There was no wind. The whole night was holding its breath at the sight of the most beautiful of babies being born.

"A girl!" Granny said to the midwife. "She will be called Maria, after Our Lady."

"No," Nina said. "She needs an Australian name."

"Maria can be an Australian name."

"No," Nina said. "Call her Josephine."

She was red in the face and tired, so Granny let her name the baby. She gave her that.

When the midwife handed over the baby, Nina turned her head and looked away. She was crying and didn't want the baby to see. Her breasts were weeping, too. They were weeping

milk at the sound of the baby's voice. Nina pressed them down with her hands to make them stop, but they would not.

"You have to feed her," Granny said. "She will not stop crying until she is fed."

Nina took the baby to her chest, and the baby was so thirsty, she drank her dry. Nina's breasts were not weeping any more, but she was still crying, because there, in her arms, was her baby, and she couldn't do anything about it now.

All the next day Nina lay in bed, as grey as the sheets. She said she wanted to die, but Granny did not let her die, because she needed to feed the baby milk until Granny could feed the baby porridge herself.

The baby cried every time the girl did not touch it, which was all the time, so the baby was crying all the time. It sent Mr DeAngelis crazy.

"I have to sleep on the floor of my own house and listen to another man's baby cry?" he said. "Get rid of the baby or I will leave you and go back to Italy!"

Granny looked at his fat belly, his lazy hands too stiff to work, his penis which could not make babies. She looked at his forehead, all wrinkles from frowning at the things he did not understand, and she looked at the baby: small and pink as a piglet, wailing so loud it was almost an aria, and she said, "Certamente, Mr DeAngelis, see you in Italy," knowing she would not.

Mr DeAngelis looked at her like a fish that had been hooked through the throat; he did not believe that his threat would work, and then it had.

Even with him banished from the bedroom, the baby kept crying through the night, and kept crying when the dogs started howling, and the roosters started crowing and lights came on in neighbours' houses. During the day, the whole of Pelham Street walked about as if they were asleep, and at night, they would stay up and fight.

One night, the baby stopped crying very suddenly. Granny could see that Nina was not in her bed. She thought: *Ah, maybe now she has finally gone to her baby.* Granny saw Nina leaning over the crib. *Maybe she is about to pick the baby up,* Granny thought. But no, she was not moving. Her arms were strong, her elbows locked. She was holding a pillow down on the child.

"What are you doing?" Granny beat the girl's arms but she did not stop. She pinched her, pushed her. Nina was strong, but she stopped when Granny yanked back her hair. Nina stepped back and shook her head at herself. She was crying again, but the baby was crying louder than she ever had before. Granny picked the baby up and sang along with the dogs and the roosters and the screaming neighbours until the sun came up.

When Granny woke, she was sitting on the stool next to the stove with the blanket wrapped around her. The baby was in her arms and Nina was gone. She had taken everything she'd brought into the house. Everything, except Eenie.

## JOSEPHINE DEANGELIS

Helping Granny in the laundry was as exciting (and ultimately disappointing) as a smoke and mirrors show at a carnival. Ghosts flickered in the shadows the steam cast against the walls, and sometimes those ghosts would become the spectacular figure of a man standing between fluttering sheets and drums of boiling chemicals—one of his hands resting on the handle of a sheathed sword, the brass buttons on his captain's jacket glinting as dangerously as stolen doubloons.

Every time the man appeared, Eenie was sure it was her sea-captain father come to take her with him on his next voyage across the Pacific.

"Come on, Eenie," the man would say. "Come and help me deliver the laundry for Granny."

Eenie would stare at the figure, wishing from the bottom of her toes that it was him this time, that they were going to deliver laundry to an exotic island in the middle of the sea, but when she stepped towards him he would turn into Nina again, his hand on his sheathed sword nothing more than Nina's hand holding the end of a wooden pole used to poke boiling rags.

Even though the laundry cart was not a barque and Nina was not a famous sea captain, Eenie helped her deliver crisp piles of sheets and shirts to the houses all around Double Bay. If they rode through Queens Cross, Eenie would keep her eyes peeled for sailors who might be captains, and whenever she spotted one she would tug on Nina's sleeve and ask, "Is that him?" And Nina would act as if she was only capable of fixing her eyes on the road ahead.

As suddenly as Nina could appear before Eenie's eyes, Nina could vanish, too, and be gone for months. Then Eenie would sit in the laundry shop window and watch the rabbit-skin his rabbits in the street, and the bloody rabbits twitch even in death. She watched for Nina, who came back sometimes to fight with Granny and try to take her away. She watched for the fruit and vegetable man, played by one of four different Chinamen whose name was always John. But she watched, mainly, for her father, who never came.

When Josephine turned twelve she left school to work in Granny's laundry full time. A gloominess seeped into the space her father should have filled. It seeped stealthily, under the cracks of doors at midnight. It pooled in the hollows under Josephine's eyes and weighed them down; it stuck to her thoughts and made them drag. Josephine thought the darkness might not stick if she kept moving, and so she spent her nights walking through the streets of Double Bay towards Kings Cross. She walked dangerously close to gaudy, feathered girls and men in high-heeled boots, but they let her pass silently. She wanted to be frightened so that she could leap out of her skin and feel lighter for a moment, but no one mugged her. No one even snarled.

She tried the walk on other nights, wearing Granny's lipstick, Granny's rouge. She piled her hair up on top of her head and practiced sauntering. She burned messages into the hearts of the men she passed with her eyes. *Look at me*, her messages said. *I exist. I exist.*

---

After a few years of practice, Josephine's message finally landed in the heart of a waiter at Woodward's Oyster Saloon on King Street. Her message released itself as stealthily as a gas, so that all he could pay attention to was the miracle of Josephine's existence fogging up his field of vision.

She sat on a stool at the oyster bar, swivelling from left to right, left to right, holding his gaze fixed. He was tall, dark and handsome, just like the men she read about in books. Except he was very dark. Italian maybe. He would whisk her off to Livorno in an old fishing boat he made himself. He would place fresh mullets at her feet as an offering to her beauty. But before all this, he slipped her a glass of lemonade with complimentary bubbles.

"Can't let a beautiful girl like you go thirsty," he said, with a wink.

Like fleas, the bubbles leapt from her drink and into her skin and tickled the roots of her hair.

She covered her mouth and giggled to mask a little burp. "No," she said, and swivelled to face him front-on. "No, you shouldn't. The only problem is, I'm thirsty for something stiffer."

Driving straight into the full-bodied attention of an unknown man without the brakes on gave her a thrill she did not think she'd be able to live without now she'd had a taste.

"How old are you?" He asked.

"Twenty-one," she said, and outlined her lips with her straw in case he'd missed how full they were. What did it matter if she was seven years shy of twenty-one? She felt twenty-one. And so many twenty-one year old girls sat at home doing needlework, wasting the freedoms their age gave them. He looked as if he did not care to know her real age anyway, in case it stood in the way.

"You got a feller?" He asked.

"Only you," she said, and he clutched his heart and dropped his head as if he had been shot straight through.

"Coroneo!" His manager called to him from the back of the room. "Are them tables going to clear themselves, you slack Greek, or what?"

So he was a Greek. That was very almost Italian. Josephine imagined the white house they would have on a hill rising out of a turquoise sea writhing with octopuses. He would come home in a toga, tasting of salt. She would turn olives into oil with her own hands. The ways of their ancestors would come back.

"I knock off at ten," Jack said. "Meet me out the back. I'll take you somewhere real nice."

By eleven o'clock she was two drinks in and as syrupy as toffee on the hob. He could have poured her into any shape he liked and she would have stayed and let him lick her all over, starting at the toes. He took her by the waist after the third drink and walked her through the streets, stopping to kiss at every intersection.

After they had walked for what felt like hours he smuggled her up the back steps of his parents' house, so that his mother would not wake. "Shhh," he said. "We'll have to be quiet."

It hurt, what he did to her down there under the sheets, but in a way that reminded her she was alive. All the same, she had heard stories of girls having to go away to the country after they'd let men keep their penises inside them for too long. She didn't ever want to go to the country, it sounded like the most boring place in the world.

"You can't stay in there," she whispered, trying not to sound too frigid.

"It'll hurt me," he said, not letting her pull away. "If you make me this excited and don't let me get off it'll turn my balls purple and then they'll fall off."

He was so frightened of losing his balls, he was beginning to shake. She did not want to make his balls turn purple because then he might not like her and above everything else that was the most important thing—that he should like her, that he should think she was maybe even worth loving. She moved a little, so that she could look him in the eye.

"Oh! Oh Josephine!" he said, shaking more violently. The way he said her name, she didn't care anymore about his seed or going to the country. The way he said her name he may as well have said, *Let's go to the country, together, you and me.*

The jolting of his body subsided until he was so still she thought for a moment she had killed him.

"Jack! Jack!" She shook him by the shoulders. "Jack, I'm sorry! You don't have to come to the country!"

"What? Who's going to the country?"

"Oh nothing, I thought you—nothing."

He sat up and she leaned in for a kiss but he was reaching for an old singlet to wipe her blood off his penis. "Can you be careful not to let the screen door bang when you leave?"

He pulled her hat from under his back where it had been crushed by the weight of them and threw it to her.

"Yes," she said, still hopeful, always hopeful, and stinging a little between the legs.

The next time they met out the back of the oyster saloon. He loved her quickly, bent over the staff dunny. This time, he did not ask her to leave. After they dressed he placed his hand on the small of her back. Her nerves burned there, in the shape of his hand.

What followed was a week of saying "Alright, why not?" Not *yes*—a word of conviction—but *alright*, a gusty word that lifted her off her feet and carried her to places she had no real intention of visiting. The middle of Rushcutters Bay Park in the rain on Wednesday evening for instance, or standing naked in the washroom of his friend's boarding house on Friday, watching him wash his penis in the low sink, saying "It's probably too soon for this."

When Josephine saw Granny's grey face, it seemed to her that the week had run out ahead like a wave and was now drawing itself up to crash over her head from above.

"Where have you been going at night?" Granny said in a frail voice. "You are too much. You are just like your mother." Granny coughed. Granny rubbed her swollen knees and groaned. She looked at Josephine as a stranger might. *I'm still here*, Josephine wanted to say, *I'm still Eenie*, but it was too late to undo what she had done, and the shame of it only kept her out longer—made her drink four drinks, instead of three.

No one came to the house when Granny died, not even Jack. There had been no notice in the paper, so no one had known to come. Customers rapped on the door, frustrated their laundry had not been delivered, but when they saw Josephine pregnant, in mourning, and wearing far too much makeup for a girl her age, they pressed their hands into their chests, muttered condolences, and quietly took their business elsewhere.

### MARCELINA BOMBELLI

The first thing Nina asked was could she write a letter.

It was 1910, maybe, and it was rare to meet new Italians in those days, seeing as the country wasn't letting any more in. They had been coming for years to the goldfields, and then, suddenly: no. You have too many babies, you use too much garlic in your cooking—but that is another story, not for here.

Marcelina met Nina at the Italian laundry in Double Bay. Nina would come and go from that place: come to take her daughter away from the woman who brought her up, and when the woman chased Nina out the door with an open bottle of bleach she would go—no one knew where, but she would put on a man's clothes and go away for months.

Marcelina did write a letter for Nina, and after that Nina was a frequent visitor to her house. The two women would talk in Italian well into the night. They would re-create Italy right there on Cathedral Street, and it got so they could almost smell the place.

Even though Nina had left Livorno when she was two, after Marcelina started on about the holiday villas studded into the mountain side, and the wine merchants brawling in the streets, and the fishermen always coming back with more fish than they could sell, Nina would get wet in the eyes. She had remembered the place well, even if it was only Marcelina's memory dropped into her head.

"Will you write another letter for me?" she would say when she got like that, and Marcelina would smile and hope another memory would come to carry them away, but then Nina would say "*Per favore?*" and Marcelina would have no choice.

She began to dread writing Nina's letters, because they were always the same. *I want to come home*, her letters would say. *Per favore fatemi tornare a casa*. They had tried writing this to her sisters, her brothers, her Mamma, her Papa, her Nonna and Nonno Buti, and none of them ever wrote back. Anyone would have thought New Zealand had drowned itself under the ocean.

Nina must have started feeling as though Marcelina's house was a deep, dark well with no echo. You could shout all sorts of things into it, and no one would shout back.

Late one night, after they had talked their way to the bottom of a bottle of wine, Marcelina could see that Nina was on the verge of asking her to write another letter. "You know what I think?" Marcelina said, before Nina could say another word. "I think you need to take a lover."



## JOSEPHINE DEANGELIS

Soon after Granny's death, Josephine was shaken awake by a man she did not at first recognise. He smelled familiar—of salt, horses and sweat. It was dark, but she could just make out a blue work shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the cabbage-tree hat of a bum. Nina was opening and closing her drawers, throwing her clothes into a bag.

"Who are you supposed to be?" Josephine asked.

"Your father," Nina replied.

"What's become of Nina?"

"She's dead. Consumption."

"Alright. So where are we going?"

"Balmain," she said. "A lolly shop in Balmain."

"What, *now*? Can't we go in the morning?"

"No." Nina pointed at her belly. "Who did that to you?"

"No one," Josephine said.

"Alright, Virgin Mary, who's going to pay for it?"

Josephine said nothing. And then, to make sure Nina said nothing else: "I'm going to keep it."

They rode in silence, through streets piled high on either side with boxes and bits of wood nailed together in a semblance of houses. They passed a pregnant cat lying on its back in the gutter, panting.

"So who is she?" Josephine asked Nina.

She was silent for a moment. She whipped the horse. "A Mrs Birkett. She has a bit of money."

"And does she know?"

"No."

Josephine rolled her eyes. "You know she'll find you out one of these days."

"Oh, I'll watch it. I would rather do away with myself than let the police find out anything about me."

After midnight they arrived on a doorstep somewhere. A crisp voice called through the door, "Who on earth is *that*?"

Josephine was looked up and down by a woman, pinched in the face and alarmed, like a crow that had just found a vulture in its nest. The woman lingered over the bulge beneath Josephine's dress.

"This is my daughter," Nina said. The woman could not take her eyes away from the bulge. "Will you not let us in now, Daisy? We have been driving for almost an hour."

Daisy put a smile on her face, though only her mouth moved. Her eyes were lead doors, sealed shut.

“Excuse us, dear,” Daisy said to Josephine, “while I have a word with your father.” Daisy folded Nina into the house by the shoulders, careful not to open the door too wide in case Josephine made a dash inside and gave birth in the middle of the floor. The door closed in Josephine’s face with a thud and she was left to lean against the nearest streetlamp and listen to Nina get torn into strips.

“Why didn’t you tell me she had been knocked up?” the woman was saying. “Why didn’t you *tell* me? I can’t understand it.” As the woman got louder, her pitch rose. A glass canister smashed to the floor.

“Calm down,” she heard Nina say.

“Send her to St Margaret’s!”

“I can’t do that, Daisy—have you ever seen that place?”

And so the argument went on. Josephine listened, shifting her weight from foot to foot to give her back a break. It was surely one o’clock by now, or maybe two. She turned her attention to the street and the wind whipping the dust up into miniature tornadoes. An old woman passed, clutching a wicker suitcase. Even in the dim gaslight of the streetlamps, Josephine could see that the woman’s once yellow skirt and blouse were filthy. She had a grand kind of hat on though, with a big feather struck through the band. It flopped up and down as she lugged her suitcase up the hill, muffling and releasing the sounds of her mutters as it rose and fell. The woman was in her own world, but even so she saw Josephine’s belly and gave Josephine a look of pity. How pathetic, to be pitied by a lunatic. Josephine turned her head away. *Come on*, she willed Nina. *Come on, let me in*.

The door opened a crack and Nina squeezed out. She had a gentle spattering of sweat across the brow; it had been a long and arduous fight.

“You can stay tonight,” she said, “but we have to get you gone before she wakes up.”

Josephine pushed herself away from the streetlamp. “Great, thanks.” Some man Nina was, she couldn’t even keep that scrawny bitch in line.

“What can you expect, being up the duff?” Nina said.

*How quickly you have forgotten*, Josephine thought, but she was too tired to fight. Nina picked up her bag and helped her up the steps into the shop.

Traces of the fight were scattered across the floor. Shards of boiled lollies and glass snatched at what moonlight made it through the windows. Josephine resolved to wake up and be dressed with all her things packed before that horrible witch cracked open the slits of her eyes. Anywhere would be better than here. Even St Margaret’s.

Josephine woke to the sight of two white shirts drifting from the sky towards the street. Upstairs, the banshee was holding Nina’s things at ransom.

“Who *are* you?” she shrieked. “Tell me!”

A pair of trousers drifted past the window. “And who is that little madam’s mother?” Silence. “Tell me!”

There was the sound of Nina’s feet descending the stairs three at a time. She rushed outside to catch the rest of her clothes before they fell into the horseshit in the street.

“Well good morning,” Josephine whispered to the bump under her dress. It fidgeted and rolled, and Josephine rolled too, onto her back. She was lying on a blanket on the floor of the shop under shelves of boiled lollies lined up in gradations of colour. The early sun shone through the jars, casting a timid rainbow across the room. At its end stood the stockinged feet of the woman, Daisy.

“I trust you slept alright,” the woman said. Her gaze could not quite hold onto Josephine’s; their eyes were two wrong ends of magnets forced to meet.

“Fine,” Josephine said. “Except for the shard of glass that was jutting into my back.”

The woman let her smile drop. “Perhaps the sleeping arrangements at St Margaret’s will meet your standards,” she said. Her look added, *Though I doubt it.*

At St Margaret’s there were the things you were not allowed to do, and then there were the things you did. These were often the same things. They were the things that happened at night, when Mrs Abbott was not stalking the hallways and the girls stretched their claws, ready for the hunt. Then Josephine snuck out the window and crab-walked across the roof to steal port wine and cigarettes from drunks asleep on the church steps, or stood watch in the hallway while boys were snuck into the bedrooms of other girls, and wondered when they would get to do the same for her.

Josephine thought about Jack Coroneo as she cleaned the nice toilets used by the pregnant women with proper husbands in the hospital next door; she thought of him as she hung washed sanitary napkins up on strings threaded through the laundry rooms, scraped charred fat out of the ovens in the kitchen, and watched unmarried girls go suddenly into labour, slumped in a puddle on a half-mopped floor.

On Saturday afternoons, Josephine sat in the garden out the back and stared deep into the earth, right down to where the skeletons of babies had been buried. They were supposed to have sprouted shoots and leaves and bloomed into less burdensome organisms, but instead they occasionally surfaced and were found scattered across the dirt after the dogs had gotten in through the hole in the fence.

Nina visited once a week, though Josephine had no idea why. They would sit on either edge of the settee in the foyer, looking at their knees. Nina would ask her how she was, and she would say “How do you think?” and then they would look at their knees some more. If Nina tried to bring up the subject of adoption, Josephine would say: “I told you. I’m keeping it,” and Nina would shake her head and leave.

“I know it’s hard for you to imagine!” she’d shout out after her. “Wanting to keep a child!”

Josephine did not waste time being sorry, because she knew Nina would be back again the following week to take her daughter’s moods like a cat o’ nine tails thwacked across her back. Nina was far more Catholic than she ever dared admit.



Jack Coroneo had no idea where Josephine was—she knew this—but still she hoped—assumed, even—that he would find out anyway, and walk in just as the crown of their baby’s head was beginning to show between her legs. He would take up her hand in his own, kiss it, and only then would their baby slip out as easily as a word.

He would say it: *Sorry*. And she would forgive him.

She had rehearsed the scene so many times it had the detailed clarity of a premonition, and so she was surprised when—as she breathed in for a final push—Nina walked through the door with her hat in her hands.

“Where’s Jack?” Josephine panted. “What have you done with him?”

“Now, now,” the nurse said. “It’s not your father’s fault you got into this mess.”

“Yes it is!” Josephine screamed. “*Yes it is!*”

“I put an ad in the police gazette for the bloke that did that to you,” Nina said, nervous, “but nothing came of it.”

“I don’t believe you!”

Josephine grunted. She moaned. Nina couldn’t take it and slipped out into the corridor where forty eyes from twenty bassinets stared up at her, blinking.

Josephine did not get to see her baby after it was born. It—or she, Josephine would later find out—was taken, big-eyed and squirming, to an empty bassinet in the corridor. “It will be easier this way,” the nurse said. “This way you won’t form a bond.”

But what about the blood that flowed through both of them? The placenta she had made that it had been feeding off for the past nine months? “I’m keeping it,” Josephine said, staring down the nurse. She wanted to call her a bitch, a fucking bitch, but she knew it wouldn’t help.

“No, Josephine, the papers have been signed.” The nurse was turning back Josephine’s sheets, tucking them in, strapping her arms down.

“I never signed anything.”

“Your father did, and with your best interests in mind. Now calm down.”

Her best interests? The hospital would probably sell her baby ‘for a donation’ to a barren, up-tight family and she would not see a penny of it. The injustice made Josephine dumb. Couldn’t they see how unfair this was? To have the most important decision of your life made by an ex-nun and a distant—possibly lunatic—parent who never wanted you in the first place? Where do you even start explaining? All she could think to do was kick the sheets off her bed and creep out into the corridor to steal her baby back.

She was the only girl in the place on the darker end of European, and for the first time she realised this could work in her favour. She would know which baby was hers by its dark lashes, black hair, melted chocolate eyes.

Josephine waited until the night duty nurses were nodding off in their seats and snuck down the hallway testing the handles on doors. At the end of the hall she opened a door onto a room full of pink-and-white babies in eggshell bassinets. The babies were bald, or with tufts of gold, blond or pale brown hair. Some were sleeping, some were wailing; their cocktail sausage fingers wriggled at the end of fat, edible hands. None of the babies were hers but they wailed anyway, because the cold air was nothing like the red warmth of a womb, and the scent of milk leaking from Josephine’s breasts was driving them wild.

The night nurse came rushing after the wails and found her. Josephine's cheeks felt old and heavy. She could not turn and run. "Where is my baby?" she whispered. "None of these are mine."

The nurse took her by the hand. "I'm sorry, Josie," she said.

"Why?"

"She is no longer with us."

"She's still in the hospital though, yes? She's just in a different ward?"

"No, dear. I'm sorry."

When the nurse pressed her gently in the small of her back, Josephine did not fight. She shuffled back to her bed, curled up to face the window and watched the bats fly home from their evening hunt.

Childless, with aching breasts, Josephine growled and sulked. Daisy let her stay in the flat above the shop with the rest of them, but her moods were not tolerated for long. "You can live here," thin-lipped Daisy had said, "but you have to do a few chores until you feel well enough to go out and get a job."

Ah, so she would be a slave here, too.

The shop was failing—anyone could see that. Josephine could have told Daisy she'd have to be a few degrees warmer than an ice chest if she wanted any child other than her meek son to dare to step foot in the place, but Josephine did not care to give her insights as well as her labour away for free. And so she watched Daisy's shop fail from on her knees, where she scrubbed the hardwood floor, and smiled into the suds.

There is only so much scrubbing and genuflecting a charismatic girl of sixteen can handle before her claws flick out of their own volition and start scratching the plaster off the walls. To spare the walls and lives of others, Josephine dressed up like a movie star and caught the tram to the Cross, where boys flashed through the streets like flocks of cockatoos. She would buy a pie, sit on a bench, and try to catch the eyes of the dark-haired ones as they passed.

The navy men were her favourite. They were steeped in delicious man-smells, and were as bold and loud as trumpets. They strode across the road as if no one would ever dare run them down. They were lovely, and even lovelier when they were drunk. Then they would tell her how beautiful she was and when she blushed, tell her again with one arm around her waist. They would ask to buy her drinks. They would breathe their whisky breaths into her neck and she would feel alive again, even something close to loved.

The next day, stories would have to be concocted, apologies dished out for stumbling up the stairs too loudly at three in the morning. By the incredulous look on her stepmother's face, she could have sworn Daisy had never had a womb at all—it was like trying to explain the can-can to a cornhusk.

When the shop finally failed, it was everybody's fault but Daisy's. They would fight about it in bed at night. "It's because your daughter comes home too late at night," Daisy said to Nina. "Don't you worry for her? Anything could happen."

Josephine called through the bedroom door: "Ah, you frigid old bitch. Anything already *has!*"

It wasn't until they moved to Drummoyne that Josephine wondered if Daisy was not quite so frigid as she appeared. Returning home from work one afternoon, wondering where to go that night, she realised she might not have to go anywhere at all, for there, waving around in the air, were the firm buttocks of a young plumber. His arms and trunk were stuck half-way under the kitchen sink.

Josephine took off her hat. "Hello," she said, shaking out her hair.

The plumber did not look impressed. He was now all the way out from under the sink, and rubbing his hands down his grease-streaked trousers. He was handsome, but uninterested. This was not how it usually went.

"Thought you was Annie," the plumber said.

He wasn't smiling. He seemed immune to her eyelashes, immune to the molten brown of her eyes.

At that moment, Daisy came in through the back door, hugging a basket of sun-warmed washing against her hip. The redness was gone from her cheeks—was she wearing powder? And her hair was done up—not in the harried way it usually was, but in a neat bun with a well-selected curl spiralling down from her temple. Now the man smiled, and Daisy did too. Their smiles were connected—it seemed for a moment—by a fine gold thread. The man looked away, looked at Josephine, rubbed his hands down his pants again, and started talking.

"Mrs Crawford, it appears I might need to come back tomorrow, to fix the, ah, balancing valve."

"Yes, of course," Daisy said. The saucy hypocrite.

"I suppose I should let Dad know," Josephine said, her voice as strong as a wrench. "So he knows how much money to leave?"

Daisy's smile hardened. "Yes, I suppose so."

So then, Josephine would have to go out to get her kicks after all.

She didn't come home until the weekend had worn down to dust, her clothes reeked of cigarettes, and the smell of semen wafted up from her underpants. The light in the kitchen was watery—it must have been four or five in the morning—but there, sitting in a meek shaft of moonlight, was Nina, head bowed down to a bottle of beer.

"More rows over you," she said. "I can't get any sleep at night."

Josephine fetched a glass and sat opposite her. "Should have finished me off all those years ago, like you wanted."

Nina's head lifted, could not hold itself up. "What a lovely daughter I've got."

"What can you expect?" Josephine took the beer, poured herself a glass. "A lovely mother I've got." She leaned over the bottle and whispered: "She had a plumber over. And I don't think it was the kitchen pipes he was fixing."

She should not have said that. Nina sat up straight in her chair, every part of her paying attention.

“From Balmain? What was his name?”

“I don’t know. It was probably nothing,” Josephine said, although she knew it wasn’t nothing any more.

Josephine thought it might be wisest to stay home in the evenings, only for a week or two, to make sure she hadn’t lit any fires that couldn’t be easily put out. But then actually standing in the middle of the room while her so-called parents glared at each other was another thing entirely. And actually staying put in Drummoyne was about as dull as living could get. The neighbours lapped up any sensational detail glimpsed in the lives of others. *Did you hear that Crawford lost his job at Perdriau’s? Yes! As a result of that nasty strike! Lord, I thought it would never end!* Eventually, one brazen neighbour found herself on the Crawfords’ doorstep holding out a plate of home-made ginger snap biscuits.

“Hello, dear,” the woman said, looking over Josephine’s shoulder. “Is your father home?”

“No,” Josephine said, trying to close the door.

The woman pushed it back with her plate. “Well, I made these for you, too.”

Now, after all this time, a neighbour was prepared to acknowledge—to her face—Josephine’s existence. She couldn’t help it; she had to let the woman in.

The woman sat at the kitchen table and waffled on about the repercussions of the strike, and the horrible ways she’d heard Germans treated their pets, and price of butter, and the unpredictable spring weather and only after she had exhausted every mundane topic did she ask the question the whole street wanted to know the answer to:

“Dear,” she asked, “Where is your mother? Why aren’t you living with her?”

The woman’s eyes were bright with hunger for the attention she’d receive once she’d grown full and interesting with this particular piece of news. Josephine was sick of it. Why should her family live caged in by the opinions of bored women, too frightened to be interesting themselves?

Nina was walking up the front path with her usual quick, over-reaching strides. Her head was down; she was clutching a bottle in a brown paper bag.

“There is my mother over there,” Josephine said, “dressed up as a man.”

The neighbour laughed but Josephine did not join in. The neighbour glanced over at Nina. She was in the kitchen now, but she was not laughing either. Her heart was barely beating, and one look at her cadaver-pale face had the woman stop laughing at once—“The potatoes,” the neighbour said, “I have left the potatoes”—and was careful to give Nina a wide berth as she made her way out into the street.

Nina did not rage or shout. She breathed in, and dropped into a chair at the kitchen table.

“I’m sorry,” Josephine said.

Nina said nothing.

“—I should leave,” Josephine said.

Perhaps her mother would protest? Ask her to stay? There was a small part of Josephine that was afraid to live alone. She did not know how she would orientate herself without someone to live against.

“Maybe a place close to your work would be good,” Nina said.

“Yes.” Her lip began to tremble. *No, she thought, don't cry, not now, she will think it is a trick.* It wasn't a trick. A dam wall had ruptured and violent, ugly sobs were forcing their way out. *Hold me,* she wanted to say, but she couldn't speak, she couldn't even breathe.

### MARCELINA BOMBELLI

One night Nina brought a sneezing, shivering boy to her place. They had been staying at a German woman's house up the road, and the over-boiled cabbage had him wasting away. The boy's father was dead and his mother was sick in hospital with consumption, Nina thought—could Marcelina take him in? “Alright, if you pay me,” Marcelina had said, and sometimes, when Nina had money, she paid.

It is hard to explain the joy that is felt when you meet someone who speaks the same as the family you have left behind on the other side of the world. This person, when you meet her, becomes a substitute for the family you have lost. There might be other things this person brings. A hand gesture, a certain way of frowning—and maybe it was a combination of these things that had Marcelina do what Nina said.

“The boy calls me Crawford,” Nina said. “It would be better for everyone if you could too.” So Marcelina did.

She knew it was her son Frank that she had to watch. Little ones born in a new country, they feel an allegiance to the new place and the people in it, so that when you say, “Now listen Frank,” as Marcelina said to her son the day he left for Sans Souci with the boy Harry Birkett, she knew he would not listen.

Frank was a good boy mostly, but the two women could not trust what he might say when he'd thrown back a beer or two. Nina would stare at him long and hard and that would often shut Frank up. He would look away; he never could stand her stares for long.

The boy Harry thought Frank was the best thing who ever stood on two legs. Frank was a motor mechanic then, and had a healthy appetite, and the hair on his arms and chest was good and strong and dark. After he moved in, the boy hardly noticed Nina when she came around to talk with Marcelina. He was too busy following Frank around like a baby bird, squawking: could Frank show him this, could Frank show him that, could Frank teach him a thing or two about girls? “What, like how to tell them apart from a bloke?” Frank would say, and Nina would stare until Frank changed the subject.

Frank enjoyed having the boy Harry follow him around, and the two became as thick as motor grease, always tinkering with rusted engines or brewing beer in the bathtub, until eventually they moved to Sans Souci.

“Why must you go?” Marcelina said. “My house is so much closer to your work.”

“I can't stand having Nina breathe down my neck,” Frank said.



God knows what he told the boy down by the beach. Whatever it was, it was not good.

“Where is the boy?” Marcelina asked, when she went to give Frank’s place a clean.

“In town with the detectives,” Frank said. “Learning how to tell the difference.”

### JOSEPHINE DEANGELIS

After dancing for two hours straight at the Palaise de Danse, Josephine went outside to breathe. The cocaine made the cool air feel like shards of glass in the nose. And was that a man staring at her from the other side of the street? She blinked. A gentle rain took the edge off the electric dance hall sign, and—yes—a man was there, watching her. She lent her head against the wall in such a way that made her hair cascade over her shoulder.

Now the man was stepping forward. Perhaps he would ask her to dance? Offer her some snow? She waited until he was at smelling distance before she turned to look him in the face.

He smelled like Nina. Josephine turned, and yes, there was Nina: damp and on edge. Josephine would have slapped her across the face if so many people hadn’t been nearby to see.

“Where have you been?” Josephine asked. She had not realised how angry she was until she opened her mouth and the words splintered out. She was speaking quickly, more quickly than she thought it possible to speak. “I went back to The Avenue, and you weren’t there, and Mrs Bone had no idea where you had gone. Do you know what that’s like, to come looking for your mother and to be met by the dark rooms of an empty house and no note and no message, no nothing?”

Nina looked horrible. Her cheeks dragged down, her mouth was a limp line drooping towards the dirt of the street. “Everything’s unsettled and upside down,” she said. “Daisy has found out I’m a woman. I’m going my way and Daisy’s going her way, and if you ever go near her again, she will go for you.”

Josephine thought of the costume brooch she had turned over to Daisy in lieu of board, the necklace that was hers that she had seen Daisy wearing about the house. “Who has the jewellery?” she asked.

“Oh, she’s got all that.”

That bitch had milked them of their precious things, then took it all and ran.

“Come and live with me in Darlington,” Josephine said, but Nina drifted back out into the rain.

Daisy had killed herself. That’s what Josephine thought when she saw the picture of her shoes in the paper. She had doused herself in kerosene and thrown herself into a fire. It was a brazen way to go. Romantic, even. And Josephine thought: *Perhaps we were not so different after all. Both of us wanted to burn the place down.*

# **THE MAN-WOMAN**

# DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

## SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

### LANE COVE

**David Horace Love:** Manager of the Chicago Cornflour Mills and resident of Chatswood.

**Emily Hewitt:** Office worker at the Cumberland Paperboard Mills.

**Ernest Clifford Howard:** Apprentice at the Cumberland Paperboard Mills.

**Constable Walsh:** Constable at Lane Cove Police Station.

**Eliel Irene Carroll:** Resident of Tambourine Bay and witness.

**Maddocks Cohen:** Solicitor for the defense at the hearing and the trial.

**Mr Gale:** Magistrate presiding over the hearing.

**Roderick Kidston:** Crown Prosecutor at the hearing.

**William Coyle, K.C.:** Barrister for the Crown at the trial.

**William Cullen, K.C.:** Judge presiding over the trial.

**Archibald McDonell:** Barrister for the Defense at the trial.

### SYDNEY CITY

**Sergeant Lillian Armfield:** ‘Matron’ at the Central Police Station, Sydney. One of the first two female constables in the Commonwealth.

**Detective-Sergeant Stuart Robson:** Detective in charge of ‘the man-woman case’ at Central Police Station.

**Detective Bill Watkins:** Detective working on ‘the man-woman case’ at Central Police Station.

---

# STRANGE WOMAN

## SEPTEMBER—OCTOBER, 1917

### SYDNEY

Spring in Sydney is a confusion of winter and summer days jarring against each other. It is the beginning of the southerly buster season, with its window-shuddering winds and sudden thunderstorms. The air is hot with pollen from the London plane trees, reddening our eyes and throats; and on the streets, horses are more irritable, their drivers quicker to take risks, or tell those in motorcars to go to hell.

During the spring of 1917 we were still fuelling the Great War of the northern hemisphere with a steady supply of men, munitions and hand-knitted socks. Meanwhile, another war raged right under our noses. A new American-style card system designed to monitor labour efficiency was introduced by the Department of Tramways and Railways, and the workers at Eveleigh train yards responded by walking off the job. Over six long weeks, union leaders lost their voices preaching like religious zealots in the Domain on Sundays—“Work slow, show the masters it is we who control them. They will all burn in the end.” The strike spread to the coalfields and the waterfront, until eventually every industry was affected, even those whose workers did not strike. Rubber tree logs piled up on wharves. No one dared ferry them to Perdriau’s upriver in Drummoyne, and the workers there were laid off one by one. “I’m sorry lads,” the foreman said. “There’s nothing for you to do.” A man named Harry Crawford returned home to his wife, hat in hand, hoping she’d understand. “Well,” she might have said, “that’s it. We won’t survive like this.”

Only a year before, twelve leaders from the anti-war socialist group, the Industrial Workers of the World, were arrested for treason and two were hanged for ‘imagining the death of the King.’ In Spring 1917, some members were still interred in enemy alien camps without ever having seen a warrant for their arrest.

These were strange times. Strange measures had to be invoked. It was hard to know who was with us or against us, or who ‘we’ even were in the first place. If we were Irish Catholics, should we have been fighting on the side of an Empire that killed our cousins in Dublin the previous year? If we were workers, should we have been fighting a capitalist’s war? If we were Australian, should we have been fighting a European diplomats’ war over Belgium, a country

half the size of Tasmania, whose citizens we doubted would ever return the favour? Those of us with sons, fathers and brothers brave enough to risk their lives for the Empire found it hard not to be personally insulted by those speaking out against the men who had signed up. Even if, deep down, we were not absolutely sure why we were fighting, too many people had died for us not to believe in the war.

By the spring of 1917, everyone knew someone who had been killed in a place few knew how to pronounce, but we were alright really, all things considered. Bodies were being found in our dreams, on the banks of rivers, but we were still attending the picture houses, the rowing regattas, the football. Strange men walked amongst us, but we were still milling on street corners on a Friday night to drink and gossip. Nothing was stopping us from betting a week's wages away at the Spring Derby, or from taking our beloveds out for a picnic, though we might have been quicker to snap if we were ever double-crossed.

#### DAVID HORACE LOVE

As his sulky pulled away from the cornflour mills, the sharp pain in Horace's stomach subsided. It had been a tenderising month. Since early August the strike had spread through industrial Australia with the voracity of a bushfire and each morning Horace told himself: today will be the day. The machines will be off, the mills empty, the starch clagged up like glue. But when he opened the door, there his men would always be: standing by the running machines like shepherds husbanding mechanical goats; through the window, the gluten effluent streaking the river yellow.

The overtime he sprinkled throughout their pay packets probably helped entice them to stay—money had a magical ability to quell rebellious instincts, the Irish in him knew that much. The pain in his stomach flared up again at the flicker of a thought: a letter he would most likely receive from his upstart little brother in the Clarence Street head office. *If you are to authorise overtime without instructions, you will have the payment deducted from your salary ...* or something equally condescending.

As the sulky clambered up the hill towards Chatswood, Horace tried to pay attention to things unrelated to the manufacture of cornstarch. He spied a goanna as big as a baby crocodile slithering through the dust. A grey-green tangle of gum trees. A glimpse of blue sky. A woman struggling up from the pipe bridge.

Horace pulled the sulky over, as was his custom—it was a long walk to Chatswood, some three and a half miles—and called to the woman, to see if she would like a ride. She was in a greyish-yellow skirt, the colour of the river. She could have been the woman from the Clifton's Lilywhite Starch advertisement escaping for her life, except her face was obscured by one of those wide, dramatic hats—what do the ladies call them? a flop?—with a large white feather in it, flapping in the breeze, trying to fly away. And she had a suitcase made of Japanese wickerwork stuff. It looked heavy—he had no idea how a woman as frail as her could carry such a thing all the way to Chatswood.

“Would you care for a lift, missus?” he called out. From where he sat, he could see that the woman’s hair was like his—turning grey at the sides. She was forty, maybe. Not too young for him.

“Madam?” He said again. The woman seemed frightened and scurried back into the bush. He’d never had any trouble with women before. He’d been dragged through the divorce courts over a pair of silk stockings not bought for his wife, but he’d never caused a woman to dash off the road like a panicked rabbit. Other women, normal women, were charmed by him.

He whipped the horse back into action. The woman must have been more of a half-witted kind of woman, he told himself. A lunatic escaped from the asylum. Well, she could go and fend for herself.

Horace saw the woman again, and again. He saw her every evening at about half-past five when he was coming home from business. He saw (or he thought he saw) her eyes, made bright by madness or hunger, flicker blue through the darkening scrub. The ride up the hill towards Chatswood used to give him a feeling of release, but with that woman lurking about the trees he felt as though he were climbing into thin air, higher altitudes. That white feather of hers, bobbing helplessly in the band of her hat—he wanted to yank it loose.

He continued to see glimpses of the woman every evening for a week, culminating the Thursday before the Eight-Hour Day holiday, when a group of children clustered around Horace’s sulky. “Please, Sir, can you give us a lift?” They clutched the wildflowers they’d picked so hard that the green sap trickled down their arms. “Please, mister, she is following us around.” They must have been telling each other stories all afternoon—amplifying her vagrancy until she became a witch chasing them through the trees, desperate to boil their bones down into a soup.

Horace gave them a ride—how could he not?—but as he whipped the horse up the hill he thought to himself: this is it. She cannot live out here any more. He knew what children could be like when presented with a person strange enough, and a landscape littered with loose stones.

The next evening, and all the evenings after, she was nowhere to be seen. A feeling of suffocation continued to hang about the place, but then he never could divorce the sensation from that of leaving work: brief relief collapsed upon by the promise of more work tomorrow, and tomorrow, fading into forever.

#### EMILY HEWITT

“Looks like you might never have to go back to work again, Em.”

Emily’s mother raised her glass in the direction of the paper mills, where a twist of smoke was winding its way towards the sky.

Emily, her mother and the new girl from the mills were sitting on Emily’s verandah enjoying a glass of holiday ale. Emily sat up straight and squinted at the smoke. It was definitely

coming from a spot very near the paper mills. She hiccupped and held her fingers to her lips. If the mills really had caught alight they wouldn't stay mills any longer than you could point and shout, *Look!* The storage sheds were crammed with stacks of odd papers and boxes gone wrong. The vats of woodchips were lined up ready to burn one by one. She thought of the gum trees rubbing themselves against the mills' roof like friendly, combustible cows, then sat back in her chair and poured her guests another round of ale.

As the women watched the smoke their thoughts dawdled towards help. What, should they notify the police? Take wet blankets and buckets full of water over there themselves? If Emily had a telephone then maybe—but who would they call? Their husbands were lost to the chaos of the Eight-Hour Day parade, no one would be in the mills' office, or at the cornflour mills over the river, and the police were probably at the pub. On public holidays misfortune had to be taken with a shrug of the shoulders, and dealt with when those who could help were getting paid enough to care.

The three women continued to sit, mesmerised by the lilting dance of the smoke rising and falling and kicking out to rise again from a new, surprising angle. It was too late to do anything about it. An enthusiastic picnicker had over-kindled his bonfire, that was all. The women leaned back in their chairs and watched the waterbirds rise from the river, turn black against the sinking sun, and dissolve in a lick of smoke.

"To the Eight-Hour Day!" Emily said, and lifted her glass to a vision she fleetingly had in which she had set fire to the mills herself.

#### ERNEST CLIFFORD HOWARD

When Ernest signed up as apprentice at the Cumberland Paperboard Mills he did not think he'd be spending most of his days running messages between the manager and his wife. But he liked the walk to the manager's house. Crossing the canal, you could get a good look at the cranes moving like slow steel giraffes reaching for their greens, and up alongside the river, if you were lucky, you might get a look at that mad woman who'd been hanging around the place for the last week or so, chasing invisible monsters through the scrub.

But the walk was never as exciting as it was on Tuesday October the second, when, about four hundred yards from the mill, Ernest saw traces of a fire. From the track he could hear what sounded like ten thousand frenzied flies; he could see that the whole side of a gum tree was blackened with soot, its leaves shrivelled up or burnt right off. He let the scene draw him closer until he found himself standing inside a circle of charred earth.

Once inside the circle, Ernest stopped short, looked down. There, at the centre, lay a woman. She was cooked, contorted. She was lying on her back, with her legs slightly drawn up. Her arms were above the chest, as if protecting her heart, and her hands were tightly clenched. Ernest saw that her left hand was nearly broken off at the wrist, it was that severely burnt. Her clothes were completely burnt off her body, with the exception of the shoes and bottom of her stockings. He could see her whole body, or what was left of it. He could see

where her vagina would have been, and her breasts. Something white was moving in her mouth and between her legs. Maggots. Hundreds of them.

He ran all the way back to the mills. He was flushed in the face, excited. He ran straight to the telephone in the office and when Emily the office girl asked him what was the matter, he laughed. He couldn't help it. Afterwards, he would be ashamed for laughing—they will think I did it, he'd think, and maybe, if enough of them think so, maybe it means that I did—but at the time all he could do was laugh, as if he had just been kissed.

## THE POLICE

At first the police thought it was accidental. That she had accidentally set herself on fire. Standing on the perimeter of the black circle surrounding the burnt body—between a large rock and a fallen tree—all they could see were objects and strange details glinting through the charred remains.

First, they made note of details they could be relatively certain about. They determined the direction of north and estimated that the rock was nine feet high. They paced the distance from the body to the paper mills and wrote in a notepad that the body was found forty yards from the mills.

The closer they looked, the more they could attribute causes to the damaged details that jumped out from the scene. For instance, there was a tall tree. The police could see that the fire had leapt right up to the top branch of that tree, where a single white cockatoo now sat. The fire had extended up to the rock, but on the right side of the body, the fire only extended six inches. Piecing these details together, they conjectured that the wind would have been coming, say, from the south, following the rise of the land.

Next, they turned their attention to the stiffened female found in the charred circle. Staring at the body, everything they didn't know swam out of the darkness into the foreground, but they stayed calm, professional, and pushed these unknowns back, remembering to pay attention only to what they could see.

The female lay on her back, facing the east. Her charred hands were fixed in the position they'd held at the moment of her death: grasping at the chest. Her right leg was slightly drawn up. All that remained on the body was a pair of stockings and a pair of shoes. Her head was in something resembling a peaceful position, although the forward part of the head—the forehead and the face—were burnt beyond recognition.

They found things—incidental details, useless in themselves—and tried to divine a story from them, but couldn't. They found a piece of gabardine under the body. They found a full set of upper teeth, and some loose teeth representing the lower plate. They found a broken quart flagon with the name *Robert* blown into the glass. They found a glass, and an enamel mug. They found the locks and corner-pieces of what appeared to be a carry-all, or small suitcase. They could see where the corners had fallen as it had burnt. There was no steel frame, which they thought odd at first, but then they remembered that some of those Japanese cases have cane frames, and there are others with a sort of fibre, with no frame at all. They found



---

locks and a knife. A hat pin. Some hat wires, or remains of a medium-sized hat. They found a kidney-shaped greenstone that appeared to have been a trinket. But they could not find any trace of kerosene, blood, or any signs of struggle.

The site was ripe for burning. Eleven years later, the mills themselves would burn down, and four years after that the building's remains would be laced with nitrate film, doused with petrol and re-ignited for a major motion picture directed by Frank Hurley. But at the time, if the police were honest with themselves, they really had no idea at all about the fire, let alone whose body was burnt in it. That was the trouble. They could not get a start and they could not find out who it was.

# STRANGE MAN

JUNE, 1920

## DETECTIVE SERGEANT STUART ROBSON

Robson always thought the Central Police Station looked as if it had been dropped from a great height onto the wrong street. It was a grand, colonial building, but it'd been built on a laneway down the rough end of town, crammed between the boiler rooms of two buildings that fronted onto wider, more respectable streets. When he'd first walked through the carriage entryway of the station as a young cop, he'd soon realised the place had been built around a lot of hot air—literally, a bare stone courtyard. The building itself was only a few yards deep. The plaster was cracking—you could see the brick underneath—but a few chips in the paint only made the place look tough. *You should see the other bloke*, the building seemed to say. And the thing was, you *could* see the other bloke. More often than not he was locked in a cell underground, bruised and licking his wounds.

During the winter of 1920, Robson felt as battle-scarred as the building crumbling around him. For weeks the press had been drumming up an impending state inquiry into a few slip-ups he'd made four years prior, and now people were talking about it at his kids' footy games, the pub, the dogs, the place where his wife got her hair done. Now she was asking questions too, and staring at him over her porridge spoon each morning as if she couldn't quite size him up. Look, he wanted to say, we might have set a warehouse on fire and planted some fire dope in a socialist's waste paper basket, but the Superintendent had the Commissioner breathing down his neck, and the Commissioner had the Premier, and the Premier had the Prime Minister throwing tantrums over his failed conscription referendums, and the Wobblies were asking for it, waving pamphlets around in the Domain with *SABOTAGE* written in block letters across the front. He wanted to admit these things straight to his wife's hard, honest face, but he knew he couldn't. He would prefer to be a murderer of socialists than worse. A ball-less whinger. A snivelling excuse-maker. Mindless fingers at the command of a head office that now had a serious case of dementia. So when a young man and his uncle and aunt walked into the station that winter, mumbling something about a murder, Robson relaxed. Here, finally, was a chance to prove he could think for himself.

He was at the front desk trying to get Miss Armfield to make him a tea when they swung back the door—the woman in her best pink dress, gripping her husband's elbow as if he might lose his way; the young man doing his best impression of a coat hanger, awkwardly filling out a stiff, cheap suit.

In less than a second Robson had steered them away from the bright eyes of ambitious juniors and into his office, and before they had even perched their backsides on the edge of their chairs, the woman started whimpering that her sister had gone missing three years ago, around the time a burned woman was found on the banks of the Lane Cove River.

"Three years ... ?" he said. "*Three years?*" He shook his head. There'd be little surviving evidence of any use. His fresh ambition was wilting faster than a cock in a rent girl who was drifting off to sleep. He was about to send the nervous woman and her family home with condolences, but then she lowered her voice and told him the reason they'd taken so long to come.

"The thing is, detective," she said, "my sister's husband was not a man."

Robson looked at her husband to see if they were having a laugh, but the man was staring fiercely into the carpet.

"He was a woman, detective. A woman in disguise as a man."

For a second Robson forgot how to breathe. He imagined the headlines. His photograph in the paper. *Well Happy Birthday, you old bastard*, God whispered in his ear. *Here's that case you have been waiting for your whole life, Stuart—now don't bugger it up.*

Then it came to him. Perhaps it would be best for her sister's reputation if the woman kept the bits about her brother-in-law being a woman under wraps, so to speak.

"Let us make that discovery," he said. "Allow yourselves—and your sister—the innocence of never having known."

On the fifth of July, Robson first saw the dead woman's "husband" and almost laughed out loud. She was in the cellar of the Empire Hotel, her forearms straining as she lifted a full keg. How she'd managed to fool that many people into thinking she was a bloke was insane. She was a tiny thing, probably not more than five foot four. Granted, her jaw was strong and square, and her hair short. She looked fifty-five at least, though she was ten years under that. At the sound of his approach she stood up, and he could see she had two worry marks etched in the middle of her brow. Her face was pale. Her lips were thin and held tightly together as if she were hiding something in her mouth that she wouldn't let go of, not even at gun point. Her eyes, though, they were what struck Robson. They were two small blue-grey marbles, pale and clear as water reflecting an overcast sky.

At their invitation she climbed the ladder—his junior, Watkins, in front, Robson behind—and went to the office of the licensee. Once the door was locked, he asked her for her name.

"Harry Crawford," she replied. Her face was still, but the muscles in her neck and shoulders tensed.

"How long have you been working here?" he asked.

“A few weeks.”

“What nationality are you?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you want to know that for?”

“I believe you are an Italian,” he said.

“No,” she said, “I’m a Scotchman and was born in Edinburgh.”

*Scotchman*. No self-respecting Scotsman would say that.

He didn’t have to arrest her. She walked to the police van without putting up a fight. Simple as she was, she didn’t know she had any other choice.

### SERGEANT LILLIAN ARMFIELD

The morning Robson went out to find the wife-killer Crawford, Lillian was rubbing cream into her hands under the front desk. Five years earlier she’d been one of the first two women police officers in the Commonwealth and still no one knew what to do with her. Get the boys a cup of tea, they’d say. Type out our reports. Dog a white slaver. Go undercover at a fortune teller’s. Stay out of the way until a case comes along with a woman in it, then sit in the interview room with your mouth shut to make sure no one puts their hands anywhere they shouldn’t. The only thing she was certain of is that she wasn’t there to replace the boys, she was there to complement them. If she wanted to keep her job, it was important to maintain some feminine habits. Hence the cream.

Detective Sergeant Robson had been flexing his muscles over this Crawford character for weeks now. All Lillian knew were the details of the ghastly remains of his wife. Lillian had seen the broken pieces of the dead woman’s dentures, had held the woman’s greenstone pendant in her own hands, had touched the square of fabric that remained of the woman’s incinerated skirt. There was something about touching these objects that transported her three years back, to the moment the woman screamed and dropped to the ground.

When Robson and Watkins dragged Crawford in by each scrawny arm, she was disappointed. He was not the thug she’d been expecting—he was small for a start, even smaller than her. He was looking wildly about like a trapped thing and asked Robson, “Are you going to lock me up?” When Robson said, “We certainly are,” Crawford’s voice fell to a whisper.

“What will happen to me when I’m put in jail?”

“Usually they bathe you and put you in clean clothes, and then in a cell,” Robson said.

“I want to be put into the woman’s section,” Crawford said very softly, and Lillian laughed because she thought it was an impudent joke.

“Don’t we all, mate!” Truskett said, and they laughed harder then, everyone but Robson. He smiled and surveyed the room like a captain at footy training.

She liked Robson. He hadn’t quite got the hang of the fact that she was an officer of the police and not a tea lady, but there was an earnestness to his virility that comforted her, the way her family’s snarling dog had done.

An hour later she was called in to witness Crawford’s examination by the Government Medical Officer.

“Strip,” the G.M.O. said. “We don’t have all day.”

Crawford’s hands were shaking as he reached for the buttons on his shirt.

“Hurry up,” the G.M.O. said, giving Lillian a look of impatience, as if it was her fault Crawford was so useless.

“Here,” Lillian said. “Let me help you.”

She watched her hands as they pulled Crawford’s buttons from their holes. *Don’t look at the wife-killer’s eyes*, she told herself. *Or his—*

Breasts? Were they breasts?

Crawford did not move.

“Well, Miss Armfield,” the G.M.O. said, “you don’t need a medical degree to know what those are, do you?”

She laughed, nervous.

“Trousers,” he said.

“What?”

“Would you please remove the man-woman’s trousers.”

She accidentally looked at the wife-killer’s face then—why? to seek permission?—and as she reached for Crawford’s belt she couldn’t shake the thought: *Is this how your wife undressed you when you got ready for bed?* She’d undressed all kinds of crazed, violent women when she worked over at Gladesville Hospital, but she’d never undressed one who had reached so far out of her sex that she had fallen from its clutches entirely.

She undid the belt in three deft moves—you learn to be swift, strapping women into straitjackets.

“No need to take them all the way off,” the G.M.O. said. “Just around the ankles is fine.”

Lillian let the pants drop, hooked her thumbs around the elastic of Crawford’s long johns and pulled down.

There was no doubt about it: Harry Crawford was more woman than man. The G.M.O. stuck his hand down amongst the hair to check that nothing had been tucked back between the thighs, but it came back empty.

Stripped naked in the room like that, the man-woman was sullen, her small dark eyes savage. “This is a terrible thing for me,” she said softly, “and the worry of my life.”

Lillian knew she wasn’t talking about the murder. She wasn’t feeling bad for anyone other than herself.

Lucky for the man-woman, the second wife was not at home when it came time to search their house. The man-woman was pleased, but became agitated when they went to open a large leather portmanteau with the initials *H. L. C.* written on the front in gold lettering, and found it locked.

“What’s in it?” Lillian asked.

“You’ll find out,” the man-woman said.

And they found out. It disclosed a phallus, a dirty thing capped with rubber, as well as a revolver with two spent shells and four live cartridges. Presumably she had shot her first wife before burning her body, but she would admit nothing.

Many years later Lillian would tell her biographer what she thought of the lesbian cult. How it was a problem the authorities had to face, even though it was difficult. It required the co-operation of the wisest and best medical specialists, police, clergy and welfare workers, because it was on the increase. Those who practiced it were furtive and subtle, and the leaders in the cult shrewd and persistent in their eagerness to corrupt others. Sooner or later, and the sooner the better, this menace would have to be faced by the authorities. It was a menace too serious to be ignored just because it was such an ugly and unpleasant issue to drag out into the open. This was why it was important she tell her biographer about the woman who pushed through the front doors of the station at six in the evening on the fifth of July, 1920.

Lillian had no doubt at all who she was. At the sight of her, and the thought of what she would soon find out, Lillian wished she was still strapping mad women into straitjackets over in Gladesville. Or that she was anywhere, really, other than there.

"Mrs Crawford, I'm afraid you are in for a terrible shock," she said. She tried to coax the woman into one of the interview rooms before saying any more, but when she took her by the elbow the woman snatched her arm away. She seemed to want to stay standing there, in the middle of the foyer, for everyone to see.

Lillian had no choice but to come right out and say what needed to be said.

"The person you married can't be your husband."

The poor woman looked lost. "You mean he's a bigamist?"

"No," Lillian said. "The person we have locked up under the name of Harry Crawford is a woman."

She laughed. "That's ridiculous." And Lillian laughed too. It was a release of nerves more than anything but she had to agree, the whole scenario seemed like it had been stolen from a terrible play, something with cloaks and cardboard swords. After a moment the woman appeared deep in thought—perhaps piecing together memories of lights turned out, sheets pulled up to the chin, and she now seemed genuinely stunned.

"The Government Medical Officer has checked," Lillian said, "and I'm afraid it's true, Mrs Crawford."

The woman shook her head. "Let me see him, please. Let me talk to him. I can't believe what you're saying."

Lillian ordered one of the boys to get a glass of water for the woman and without asking Robson or any of the others, went down to the cells to confront the man-woman herself.

Lillian found her curled up on the bunk in her cell.

"Your wife's here," Lillian said. "She wants to see you."

The man-woman groaned and rolled over to face the wall.

"You owe her an explanation, don't you think?"

The man-woman was listening. Lillian could tell because her head was ever so slightly raised off the bunk, but when a howl came from her wife upstairs the man-woman played dead. Just as Lillian suspected, she was a coward through and through.

When she returned upstairs, she found Robson with the suitcase open in the middle of the foyer.

“And see this?” he was saying. “This is what she’s been using. So you see now, Mrs Crawford? You see what we’ve been trying to say?”

### IN MALE ATTIRE

## WOMAN CHARGED WITH MURDER

### WHAT THE POLICE HAVE LEARNED



EUGENE FALLENI,

the woman who posed as a man, leaving the Central Police Court yesterday with Detective-Sergeant Robson, who is in charge of the case.

## SYDNEY

On trains and ferries and trams, in kitchens over wheat bran or marmalade on toast, we opened our newspapers expecting to read about the inquiry into the police.

When we opened the paper, there was that crooked detective. But he was not standing in the dock—he was standing tall and proud with his chest out, walking a wiry little man towards the police court.

The headline read: *IN MALE ATTIRE. WOMAN CHARGED WITH MURDER.*

We blinked. We looked at the picture again. *What? That is a woman? In male attire?* We read on.

She was an Italian. Of course she was. She had married a man named Martello in her native country, and had a daughter with him. She sailed with him to New Zealand where they lived for a few years, and then she came to Sydney with the daughter. Here, amongst us, she lived as a man, she did a man's work. She met and married a widow named Annie Birkett who never knew she was a woman and four years later the widow was dead, burned alive on the banks of the Lane Cove River.

We looked up at our husbands. We looked up at our wives. "But how could she not ... ?" we asked. "Didn't they ever ... ?" we asked.

Apparently, no one knew.

## DETECTIVE BILL WATKINS

He was on the train, Watkins was, a long way out of Sydney, and he was glad for it. With his thug boss Robson getting paranoid he was out to steal Robson's job, and all the sideways talk around the Wobblies, and the station telephone ringing itself berserk with news from people desperate to be a witness on the man-woman case, it was impossible to get any perspective.

Nearly all the callers were women. Nearly all of them believed what they were saying, too, though not half of them were telling the truth. Or maybe they were all telling the truth—he'd heard that people actually bled from the hands in the parts of the world that believed in stigmata. It didn't take him long in the job to work out that 'the truth' was a room with the blinds down and the lights out. You could only see it if you pulled the blinds up to let in a little light, but then it wouldn't be a room with the blinds down and the lights out any more, would it? It would become something else entirely.

In any event, the man-woman case file was littered with notes from mysterious female callers. After Walsh up at North Sydney had found the body (and no incriminating evidence), he'd received a telephone call from a woman who said if he looked again he might find a bottle of kerosene at the site and promptly hung up without giving her name. Another woman called C.I.B. to tell them a black girl had gone missing from a laundry in Double Bay around the time the man-woman had worked there. And a third woman called to say that both she and her neighbour had been screwing Harry Crawford while their husbands were out, until jealousy had her bore a hole in their shared wall to spy on the lovers in the act. She fainted



when Watkins showed her the 'device', which had—presumably—been up her own snatch, and made them promise she would not be subpoenaed as a witness. *Why call, then?* Watkins wondered. *Just for the thrill of being involved?*

Wheat fields smeared across the train window. Watkins was on his way to Hay in search of the dead woman's dentist. How any dentist could recognise an upper plate he'd made ten years ago beat Watkins, but then the dentist would see very different things in those dentures depending on what questions he was asked—Robson had at least taught him that.

Yes, the dentist would be easy to sort out, but what about the man-woman's daughter? They still couldn't find her, and Watkins wondered what she looked like. Going off her friends who'd been calling the station with gossip, he didn't figure her being as butch as her mother. He imagined her giggling about her eccentric mother's antics while she and her friends shelled peas into their aprons on their front steps. It was common knowledge—these girls had said down the telephone—that Josephine's mother got about in trousers, that Josephine and her mother had worked together at the Riverstone Meatworks, and that when her mother got her finger caught in one of the machines, she'd bandaged the stub of her amputated finger herself. Watkins could never imagine his wife being as tough as that.

To pass time on the train, Watkins played a game with himself. One by one, he imagined all the women he knew, in trousers. He started with Miss Armfield—she was a plain looking woman anyway, and if it weren't for her hatred of sex perverts he could imagine her becoming something of a man-woman herself. He imagined his mother in plumber's overalls. Now that was a terrifying thought—his mother, with her fist up someone's pipe. He imagined his sisters dressed as butchers. He looked around at the women in his carriage and imagined them in police boots, carrying pistols, swinging batons above their heads, and began to feel afraid—not of being hurt, but of ever so gradually becoming obsolete.

## SYDNEY

In waiting rooms and parlours, in pubs and tea houses and milk bars, the story was changing. Every day we had to wind the pictures back in our minds and start again. She did not grow up in Italy, she went to New Zealand as a child, and it was there that she met Martello, the Captain of an Italian ship. She became so attached to him, she left her parents to become his wife. They sailed in a vessel with their only child, Josephine, and eventually the mother and daughter were landed in Newcastle.

But what of the burned woman found in the bush? How did we know she was the man-woman's wife?



## CONSTABLE WALSH

Constable Walsh was the first officer to see the burnt woman in the scrub by the mills back in 1917. He could still remember how the red of her heart and lungs could be seen through the crumbled charcoal of her ribs. And her hands: he would never forget those two stiff talons clutching at that roasted heart. It had moved him then, almost to tears. At the Coroner's Court they'd said she'd probably been a mad woman escaped from Gladesville Hospital, and he'd been encouraged not to worry any more about it. But when, three years later, he found out the size of the lie this woman had been told, and the type of monster that told it, it fired him up so that he couldn't sleep at night. The picture of the man-woman he had seen in the *Sun* was seared into the back of his eyelids, he had stared at it that many times.

The case had been passed up the ladder to the boys in the city, and yet after weeks they still had nothing to prove the burned woman was this monster's wife, beyond the coincidence that one woman had vanished when the other had appeared. Surely someone at the mills had seen the picture, too; surely they'd remembered seeing him—her—stalking through the scrub, wringing her hands.

He decided to go to the paper mills again. He'd been a number of times, standing in the shadows of the city detectives, but they never let him speak. All they wanted to do was walk through the patch of scrub where the body had been found and look around. Parts of the gum that had been singed were still black, but new branches had begun to grow out of proportion to the rest of the tree, so that it looked like a tyrannosaurus rex—strong and ancient, with feeble child arms. *Let's go to the mill*, he'd wanted to say. *Let's talk to them, one by one*. But he never did say anything. He stood behind them, and nodded, and did what he was told.

"Not to be a cunt," Detective-Sergeant Robson would say, "but do you think you could stand a bit further away?"

He started to become a little looser with the regulations. Or, another way of looking at it: he started to take his own initiative. He took a copy of the *Sun*, with the picture facing out, and went to the mills alone.

He spoke to the office girl, Emily Hewitt, about the fire she had seen. He spoke to the watchman on duty over that October long weekend, and another man, Hicks, who had seen a strange man look up towards the incinerators at the crack of dawn. He was amazed by what people would tell you, if you ever dared to ask.

When he got wind of a woman who had been telling everyone in the area she'd been stalked through the scrub around the mills by a suicidal-looking man that very weekend, he hightailed it over to her house.

Mrs Carroll's place was a newish bungalow, built of brick the colour of oily liver. She seemed to know that Walsh was coming, and seemed pleased about it, too, in a macabre sort of way. She was sitting by the only window that let in any light, and had herself turned at such an angle that her cheekbones glowed skeleton-white out of the shadows of the room.

Walsh lowered himself into a velvet club armchair and was nearly swallowed by it, so that his knees were like the knees of a huntsman: two sharp angles reaching up.

"Mrs Carroll," he said, adjusting himself in the chair, "I hear you've remembered seeing a man about the vicinity of the Cumberland Paper Mills in 1917?"

"Oh yes," she said. "A very strange man."

He pointed at the paper. "Is this the man you saw?"

"Yes, yes that's him."

"And when did you see him?"

"Good Friday."

"What? In April?"

"Yes, the 28th of September."

"So not in April?"

"Yes."

From where he sat he practically had to throw the *Sun*, picture out, onto the table in front of her. "Can you remember the colour of this man's eyes?"

"He had eyes of a grey hazel colour."

"I'm sorry?"

"That is, they were neither brown nor grey."

He tried not to look disappointed.

"They were a peculiar colour, Constable."

"It appears so."

He thought for a moment. Perhaps he was complicating things. Perhaps he should just let the woman talk.

"Mrs Carroll, would you mind simply telling me the story of when you saw the man, and I'll try and write it all down as quickly as I can?"

"Yes, certainly," she said. She cleared her throat and, as she did, a breeze thrust a shrub up against the windowpane. The light that filtered through the leaves was a sickly green, and made the hollows of the woman's cheeks almost look burnt out. She was thrilled, he could tell, by the thought that the burnt woman could have been her.

---

# THE ACCUSED

## AUGUST—OCTOBER, 1920

### THE PROFESSIONAL MEN

When dawn seeped meekly over the Tasman's edge on Monday August 16, the weather was cloudy and unsettled, as if all our evaporated sweat from the weekend's effort had curdled what should have been a crisp blue winter sky. On Saturday, the Roman Catholics of the city—some sixteen thousand—had filled the Domain to protest the British government's poor treatment of Archbishop Mannix of Melbourne, while His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had walked the golf links at Rose Bay and Louisa Lawson, mother of the New South Wales suffrage movement (and drunkard poet Henry) was laid to rest in the next best thing to a pauper's grave at Rookwood. Sunday saw solicitor Rod Kidston of the Crown Prosecutor's Office skip church to run through the proceedings of Monday's hotly anticipated man-woman case with his uncle, the Crown Prosecutor, while Maddocks Cohen, solicitor for the defence, aired his navy-blue suit, knowing that by then the most he could do for his haggard client was look his dapper best.

And so on Sunday night the two solicitors put their nerves to bed and woke on Monday energised, as if they had spent the night in an electrical substation and come out with surplus free electrons. They felt the way young directors do before the dress run of a play, for after over a month of remands they were finally about to attend the first morning of the man-woman's committal hearing.

The hearing afforded both men the opportunity to run their witnesses through the emotions they had set down for them, to see if that speech needed shortening, or that veil needed lifting and at what time, without the accused's life being wholly in the balance. Could the Crown prove that the burnt-to-a-crisp 5' 7" body found by the Lane Cove River was tall Annie Birkett? Would Lily Nugent admit her sister had a weakness for drink? Would the accused's "wife" be in attendance, and show support for her distressed spouse? These were elements neither lawyer could now control.

As both men shaved in the mirror before breakfast, their minds were as clear and indestructible as bulletproof glass. When they arrived at their respective offices, they greeted their secretaries with the same charismatic smiles they would soon try on the magistrate, Mr Gale.

They lived for these Monday morning committal hearings, when the week ahead glimmered with the possibility of their success. Of course both men could not succeed, and Maddocks Cohen, though calm, confident, and dashing as always in his navy-blue suit, suspected the forty subpoenaed witnesses were stacked ominously against him. So many infringements had been made by the prosecution—with the police parading the accused through the local court seeking remand after remand, sometimes without even telling him, her advocate, that she would be making an appearance. To make matters worse they walked her from the cells to the court via the courtyard, instead of through the private, indoor passageway as was convention. He could only presume they were trying to give the press ample photo opportunities, but he could not dwell on these details, or else he would likely lose his cool.

It was hard to imagine the ground where the police court stood as ever having sustained trees or grass or snakes burrowing under rocks. The imposing stone building rose from the earth like an uninhabitable slab of granite and was now surrounded by curious white-skinned mammals native to some other place, hopeful they might witness the punishment of one of their own. The lawyers moved between these mammals at pace, with the strident steps of purposeful men. They took the steps by twos, adjusting their ties and shaking the cuffs from their sleeves as they did. The crowd peeled back from the lawyers, wide-eyed, and the lawyers strode on, keeping their faces arranged in a semblance of nonchalant calm, as if nothing had ever surprised them, as if everything always went according to plans of their own design.

If the courthouse on Liverpool Street was imposing on the outside, its insides revealed that this impression of natural grandeur was exactly that—an impression—and one invented by lofty English imaginations before being built by short-fingered Irish hands. The furnishings were the colour of English parlours: maroons and dark, deciduous greens. The patterns on the carpet did not quite line up with the patterns the moving sunlight made as it shone past the beams in the ceiling and the joins in the skylights and refracted off the right-angles of the doorframes, so that it seemed to be a courthouse made from turning pieces always trying to connect, but never quite managing it.

Kidston did not notice these irregularities. When he bowed upon entering the court, he was bowing to the solid profession he had given his life to; a profession that had been worthy of his uncle's passions and mental energies and had done well for him, affording him a house in Mosman and two holidays a year. But Cohen—a former bankrupt who had stood on both sides of the dock's wooden barricade—knew that the law was not a divine decree received, Moses-style, from the clouds, but a tangled thing of sticky tape and string that had survived years of add-ons and subtractions and the twisting of language to the point at which it almost—but never quite—breaks.

At various positions along the front row of the gallery, journalists filled notebooks with furious scratching. They occasionally looked up, cocked their heads this way and that, and then scratched on, their hawkish eyes seeing more quickly, and in more detail, than those of the regular human on-looker.

They saw when, **just after ten o'clock, Falleni, in man's attire, was ushered into the dock.** They saw that **she wore a grey suit, a blue tie, white collar, black boots, and that her hair was plastered down in the ordinary way and fashion.** To their eyes, her face appeared **pale and rather haggard, and while the charge was being read over to her, her hands picked nervously on the dock rail. In answering she said "not guilty" in a low voice then sat down on the dock bench.**<sup>1</sup>

Falleni, looking more effeminate than on any previous occasion, sat with legs crossed, and listened with drawn countenance and steady attention to the story told against her. Each time her advocate, Mr Maddocks Cohen, walked across to the railings of the dock to consult her, those in the front positions of the galleries almost fell into the court itself on their endeavours to catch a glimpse of the man-woman.<sup>2</sup>

Constable Walsh was called to tell of how he found the remains of a body near the Cumberland Paper Mills at Lane Cove. He told the court that a mills worker named Hicks had identified Falleni as having loitered near the murder site around the time the body was found, and Mr Cohen did not waste the opportunity to point out that Hicks only identified Falleni after her picture had appeared in the paper and **"the whole world knew about the man-woman!"**<sup>3</sup>

Dentists—with the help of ledgers—remembered making the very teeth that were found by the dead woman's body for a Mrs Birkett almost ten years prior. And Mrs Lily Nugent would recognise the dead woman's pendant and chain as having belonged to her sister, the very same Mrs Birkett for whom the teeth had been made.

Mr Cohen began his cross-examination with questions about Mrs Nugent's sister's drinking. If the burned woman was indeed Annie Birkett, mightn't she have been drinking metho by herself on the banks of the river, and mightn't she have spilt some on herself, and mightn't she accidentally have caught on fire?

**Mr Cohen: Was she not under the influence of drink at the wedding ceremony?**

**Mrs Nugent: No.**

**Mr Cohen: Are you aware that on the night of the marriage she had to be put to bed by a woman?**<sup>4</sup>

The newspaper men, though impartial, could not resist a snigger. Of course Annie had been put to bed by a woman. Hadn't she married one? Didn't she get naked and rub up against one in the marriage chamber?

**Mr Cohen: Did they live happily together?**

**Mrs Nugent: No.**

**Mr Cohen: Was that not on account of her drinking habits?**

**Mrs Nugent: No.**

**Mr Cohen: Didn't your sister have a peculiar temperament?**

1. *Evening News*, Monday 16 August 1920.

2. *The Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday 17 August, 1920.

3. *Evening News*, Monday 16 August 1920.

4. *Ibid.*

**Mrs Nugent:** I never had a row with her until she met Crawford.

**Mr Cohen:** What was the row about?

**Mrs Nugent:** Ah, about Crawford. He used to tell yarns. He would tell my sister I said things about her, and tell me she said things about me. I got dissatisfied with Crawford, and felt I could not have him on the place.

**Mr Kidston:** Did ever the question of Crawford's sex come up?

**Mrs Nugent:** No.

**Mr Cohen:** He was always a nice man?

(Witness made no reply.)<sup>5</sup>

HARRY BELL BIRKETT, the deceased woman's son, was the next witness.<sup>6</sup>

**Mr Kidston:** What fluids did your mother drink?

**Mr Birkett:** She was a great tea drinker.

**Mr Kidston:** Did she drink ale?

**Mr Birkett:** She might have drunk ale at Drummoyne brought in by accused.

**Mr Kidston:** Did she drink spirits?

**Mr Birkett:** Not to my knowledge.

**Mr Kidston:** Did you ever see her under the influence of liquor?

**Mr Birkett:** No.<sup>7</sup> ... There was one big row.

**Mr Kidston:** What was that?

**Mr Birkett:** I don't know what it arose out of, but Crawford was wild, and smashed many a thing up.<sup>8</sup>

Cross-examined by Cohen, Birkett had to turn his head at a sharper angle to meet the lawyer's gaze, so that the late morning light fell harshly across his face, making his nose appear sharper, his eyebrows set at a more resentful arch.

**Mr Birkett:** I have heard my mother say that Falleni pestered her so much that she was practically forced to marry him. They did not live happily for long after the marriage. It was a matter of weeks. They would quarrel no matter who was there. They would row in the shop.

**Mr. Cohen:** Was methylated spirits kept in the home?

**Mr Birkett:** Yes.

**Mr. Cohen:** Did your mother ever smash crockery, or other things?

**Mr Birkett:** No.

[...]

**Mr Cohen:** Has the accused been cruel to you, or chastised you?

---

5. Ibid.

6. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

7. *Evening News*, Monday 16 August, 1920.

8. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

Mr Birkett: He never had much to do with me, and he treated me with contempt. He has never been cruel to me.<sup>9</sup>

The light moved across the room, pulling Birkett from the stand, setting Mrs Bone, a grocer from Drummoyne, in his place.

**Mr Cohen: Have you seen Falleni and Mrs Birkett out together?**

**Mrs Bone: Yes, I have seen them out on Sunday nights.**

**Mr Cohen: Walking arm-in-arm and going to church?**

**Mrs Bone: Yes, arm-in-arm, but I do not know where they were going.<sup>10</sup>**

Mrs JANE WIGG, who lived at Drummoyne in 1917, deposed to seeing accused and his wife leave their residence together one morning late in September or early in October, 1917, and that she never saw Mrs. Birkett alive again.<sup>11</sup>

After further corroborative evidence, and as the day's proceedings were nearing an end a young married woman entered the box. The lights had not been turned on. She told her story, which contained some startling evidence in a dramatic tone. The court became hushed. Falleni shifted nervously in her seat. The witness was shaken by attacks of shivering.

This witness was Mrs Eliel Irene Carroll, living at Longueville, and she said that on the Friday preceeding Eight-Hour Day, 1917, about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, she saw a man sitting on a rock with his head buried in his hands looking across the moat near the paper mills.

[...]

To Mr. Cohen: When I first startled him he had a hunted, melancholy look on his face, and I said to my mother I thought he was going to commit suicide. I frightened him and he frightened me. I looked behind when he was following me, but I wouldn't look behind again. I remarked it to my people when I got home.

To Mr. Kidston: I did not speak to the police after the body was found because it was the body of a woman. Had it been that of a man I would have spoken up.<sup>12</sup>

Falleni was told to stand up, and Mrs Carroll said she was the "man".<sup>13</sup>

The further hearing was adjourned until Wednesday morning<sup>14</sup> and Maddocks Cohen came up for air. He buttoned his jacket, smoothed down his moustache and packed his briefcase as was his ritual at the end of a day in court. Although he moved with deft ease, he felt queasy, as if he had spent the day spinning in circles with his eyes shut, and not coolly cross-examining the Crown's witnesses in court.

If his client had gone into the police court a nervous wreck, now she was almost catatonic with worry. As she rose from her seat, she left the colour from her cheeks behind. Cohen had

9. *The Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday 17 August, 1920.

10. *Evening News*, Monday 16 August, 1920.

11. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 17 August, 1920.

12. *The Daily Telegraph*, Tuesday 17 August, 1920.

13. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

14. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 17 August, 1920.



hoped word would reach his client's wife that the hearing was finally on (how could she miss it, when it was shouted by every newsboy at every tram stop in the city?), but she had not shown, and Cohen suspected the worst. Even the daughter—who had known his client's secret from the beginning—had not made any effort to support her mother. He—a lawyer—was the closest thing to a friend she had.

On Wednesday morning, **the case was called on in No. 3 Court. There was not a dock there, and in order that she should not be exposed to uncomfortable scrutiny a green folding screen was provided by the police authorities. This was placed round a chair just behind the solicitors' table, so that the accused woman could be seen only by the magistrate, the witnesses, the members of the legal profession, and the court officers. Dressed in male clothes, as before, Falleni was brought into court before the public was admitted.**<sup>15</sup>

Before the first witness was put into the box, the magistrate escorted across the bench and into the court Mr Graham Browne and Miss Marie Tempest, the well-known actor and actress. They occupied seats adjacent to the solicitor's table, and appeared keenly interested in the proceedings.<sup>16</sup>

Although Kidston had made such a good start on the Monday, the presence of the actors unsettled him. They were playing the role of audience, watching real life play out on stage, and here was the magistrate condoning this perverse inversion of life and artifice. Kidston refused to gawk and smile. He made as if he were reading over his notes, and held fast to his belief that the theatrics of the courtroom were rituals in service to truth. Cohen, however, watched the actor and actress with an amused smile. Yes, he thought, after Miss Tempest's terrible performance in *Twelfth Night* last month, she could learn a thing or two from my client.

**DR ARTHUR AUBREY PALMER, Government Medical Officer, said that he held a post-mortem examination upon a charred body on October 3, 1917. The upper portion was badly burnt, and the junction between the charred portions and the other was red and blistered.**

**Dr Palmer: This led me to believe that the burning took place before death.**<sup>17</sup>

Mr Kidston: Can you say whether she was conscious or unconscious?

Dr Palmer: No.

The doctor then described his second examination at the Morgue, on July 22, after the body had been exhumed. Those soft parts which had originally been charred had become macerated, dissolved, and practically disappeared.<sup>18</sup> **Several X-ray photographs were taken. These were produced.**<sup>19</sup>

15. *Evening News*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

16. *The Sun*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

17. *The Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

18. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

19. *The Sun*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

Dr Palmer: We found in the skull a number of fissures extending for the most part through the whole thickness of the bone. With one possible exception, these were all due to the influence of severe heat and the subsequent dissolving of the charred tissue.<sup>20</sup> **That possible exception was a crack in the right side at the back of the head, which measured on the outer surface between two and three inches. This was in a situation, and had an appearance, which might have been caused by violence, such as a fall or a blow.**

Mr Kidston: During life?

Dr Palmer: There was nothing to show if it was caused during life or death. It could have been caused during life.

[..]

Mr Kidson: Supposing the woman was injured, reduced to unconsciousness and then burnt, would that be a possible theory of what happened?

Mr Cohen: I object to that.

Mr Kidston: I am only asking his opinion.

Dr Palmer: Presuming it was due to violence she would probably have been unconscious at the time. An injury which would produce that fissure would, in many cases, produce unconsciousness.<sup>21</sup>

Mr Cohen: Did you see any trace of bullet wounds?

Dr Palmer: No.

Mr Cohen: There were no marks of violence?

Dr Palmer: Only with one possible exception.

Mr Cohen: How long were you at the locality on October 2?

Dr Palmer: About a quarter of an hour. Superintendent Tait was there with four or five other police.

Mr Cohen: Were the police searching the locality?

Dr Palmer: I think they were.

Mr Cohen: Did you see a whiskey bottle?

Dr Palmer: Yes. It had a faint smell of spirits of some kind—probably kerosene or methylated spirits; but I would not be sure of that.

Mr Cohen: Would it have been possible for the woman to have fallen asleep and caught fire?

Dr Palmer: I think it would have been.

Mr Cohen: Did you notice any signs of a struggle?

Dr Palmer: I was not so much interested in that aspect.

Mr Cohen: Is it a fact women burn more quickly than men?

Dr Palmer: Yes; but that is on account of the nature of their clothing.

Mr Cohen: Would you say it would not be possible for the crack on the right side of the head to be caused by heat?

Dr Palmer: I would not say that.<sup>22</sup> Before I had studied the particular crack, I would have said it was caused by violence, but now I am not sure, it might be either.<sup>23</sup>

20. *The Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

21. *Evening News*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

22. *The Sun*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

23. *The Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

DR STRATFORD SHELDON corroborated Dr Palmer's evidence, but he still had the impression that the crack on the right side of the head was due to violence, but whether ante, or post mortem he could not say.<sup>24</sup>

**Dr Sheldon: We don't have experience of burned heads every day, but my impression is that it was due to violence.**<sup>25</sup>

The doctors were retired, and Kidston turned to see the gallery—his dress rehearsal jury—nod to each other, impressed by the gravitas of the doctors, then turned back to recall **HARRY BIRKETT the son of the dead woman. He produced a copy of The Evening News of October 16, 1917, containing a reproduction of a photograph of his mother's boots. The accused, he said, got him to read a copy of the Evening News in which was a photograph of the shoes, but he could not remember the date. The photograph was similar.**

**Mr Kidston (reading from the paper): It was on page three of the issue of—**

**Mr Cohen (shouting): I object!**

**(He snatched the paper from Mr Kidston's hand.)**

**Mr Cohen: He was going to read the date out. I have strong reasons for objecting to it.**

**Mr Kidston: You've got strong hands. I don't know what your reasons are, but there's no reason to resort to violence.**

**(Mr Gale admitted the newspaper.)**<sup>26</sup>

HENRIETTA SCHIEBLICH was the next witness, for whom an interpreter in German was sworn. The witness was ill, and after being sworn, sat beside the witness-box, with a lady friend who held smelling-salts. She gave her evidence mainly in broken English, but at times when she could not express herself clearly, the services of the interpreter were necessary.<sup>27</sup> **She said that accused came with his step-son to her place in Cathedral Street.**<sup>28</sup> He took a room, and told her he had sold his own furniture the previous day.<sup>29</sup>

**Mrs Schiebligh: Accused's behaviour was as if he had been extremely excited or half-mad.**

**(Mrs Schiebligh continued her story in broken English, dispensing with the interpreter.)**<sup>30</sup>

Mr Kidston: Did you ever start to speak to the boy and Crawford stop you?

Mrs Schiebligh: No. I never spoke to him while Crawford was there.

Mr Kidston: How did Crawford speak to the boy?

24. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

25. *Evening News*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

28. *The Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

29. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

30. *Evening News*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

Mrs Schieblich: He always spoke very sharply to him. Not cruelly; he spoke the same way to us all.<sup>31</sup>

Mr Cohen: This man became so confidential with you that he told you that he gave his wife a crack on the head?

Mrs Schieblich: Yes.

Mr Cohen: What did you say? Did you not say, "Oh, you bad man"?

Mrs Schieblich: No, I said, "You should not have hit her so hard."

[...]

Mr Cohen: Is it not an invention on your part about Falleni saying he was haunted?

Mrs Schieblich: No, it is not.<sup>32</sup>

**Accused left, but came back later, and said that he had been living with his wife at North Shore, but they had had another terrible row and parted again. Witness said, "bring her to me, and I'll bring you together again."**

[..]

**GEORGE ROBERT SMITH, a boxmaker of Elswick Street, Leichardt, said that in 1917 he lived near accused and Mrs Birkett, who were known to him as Mr and Mrs Crawford. He went to their house to get Mrs Crawford to help with the housework as his wife was ill. Accused said, "You're too late. She's cleared out with the plumber at Balmain."**

[..]

**Mr Smith: The Crawfords seemed to be the two extremes. One day they would be jangling, and the next day they would be on the verandah, as affectionate as a young couple.**

**Mr Cohen: On the whole, they lived on affectionate terms?**

**Mr Smith: I suppose every couple has a jangle now and again.<sup>33</sup>**

The next witness called was LYDIA PARNELL. She was greatly agitated, and her body shook with sobs as she entered the witness box. She was sworn and was then given a chair on the floor of the Court. She took frequent drinks from a glass of water while giving evidence.

Mr Kidston: You know this person as Crawford; is that the person present in the court?

The witness looked towards Falleni, and almost inaudibly murmured, "Yes". She broke down again, and had another glass of water and removed her hat.

Regaining her composure, Mrs Parnell said she asked the boy if he knew where his mother was, and he said he did not. About an hour later Crawford told her he had sold all the furniture. The next morning, Crawford told her that the boy was comfortable with some relatives.<sup>34</sup>

31. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

32. *The Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

33. *Evening News*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920

34. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

Subsequently, said Mrs Parnell, Falleni told her his wife was at North Shore. She gave him £1 for the dead woman's raincoat. After that he was a regular visitor. If he was out of work he stayed with her, and if he was working he spent his leisure time there.<sup>35</sup>

Mrs Parnell: In December of 1917 he told me that he had met his wife in George Street, and that she had asked him for money. He said that he told her he had none, and jumped on a tram-car. (To Mr Cohen): Falleni was always a very welcome friend at our house. I only saw him under the influence of liquor twice. That was at parties. He was practically one of our own.<sup>36</sup>

GEORGE WILLIAM PARNELL, son of the last witness, said on one occasion Falleni asked him to read the paper, and see if anyone had been found dead, or murdered. He read an account of a body being found in the bush at Chatswood, and Falleni exclaimed, "That's the ——! That's her!" For about a week witness was requested by accused to read the paper, and "see if there was any more bodies found."<sup>37</sup>

The hearing was adjourned until the following morning.<sup>38</sup>

From an early hour on the Thursday a crowd waited to gain admittance to the court, and about 10 minutes after the doors opened the public enclosure and the precincts of the court were crammed.

[..]

MRS EDITH HOYES, living at the Avenue, Drummoyne, said she remembered Crawford coming to live next door to her. Crawford had told her that his wife was addicted to drink.

Mr Kidston: When did the Crawfords leave there?

Mrs Hoyes: After Eight-Hour Day, 1917.

Mr Kidston: When did you see Crawford next?

Mrs Hoyes: I saw him coming down the Avenue, and when he drew up to me he said, "She has gone." I asked him where she had gone, and he said he did not know. When asked if she had taken her clothes, Crawford said, "Yes, she has taken everything, and left me nothing."

Mr Kidston: Was the accused doing anything with his hands when speaking to you?

Mrs Hoyes: Yes, he was stroking his forehead.<sup>39</sup>

A couple of months later she saw him again, and he asked her if she had seen Mrs. Crawford, or heard anything about her, or had anyone been making inquiries about her.<sup>40</sup>

35. *Evening News*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

36. *The Daily Telegraph*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

37. *Evening News*, Wednesday 18 August, 1920.

38. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

39. *The Sun*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

40. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

Mr Kidston: What was his manner?

Mrs Hoyes: He seemed relieved when I told him I had not seen her.

ERNEST BONE, husband of a previous witness, said he was in business at Drummoyne. The accused left The Avenue, Drummoyne, on the Wednesday after September 29, 1917. Witness had had a conversation with Crawford in Lyons Road, Drummoyne. Crawford said: "The —— has cleared out." Witness asked him who he meant, and he replied: "The missus. She goes out with other men." Witness said, "I don't think she is like that," and Crawford said, "Oh yes, she is, I have letters to prove it." Crawford was very excited and smelt of drink.

[..]

Mr Kidston: Did you come into touch with the deceased?

Mr Bone: Yes. She was a very nice woman.

[..]

Mr. Kidston: Did you ever hear the accused use an offensive name about his wife?

Mr. Bone: Oh, yes. One day when we were all down at the beach at Five Dock, prawning. I heard him say, "Come here, you long, skinny ——."<sup>41</sup>

EMMA BELBIN, a married woman, living at Waverly, said that she was living in Rozelle in 1917. There she knew and used to visit a Mrs. Parnell, at Drummoyne. She remembered meeting Falleni there, in the first week of October, in 1917.

Mrs Belbin: I noticed that the accused looked sick, worried, and upset. I was there for two hours, and Falleni did not speak to me, and I don't think he spoke to anyone else. Once Falleni said, "My wife has gone away to the country. She used to drink, and I won't have her back, though she was a splendid woman in the house." I have seen Falleni drinking, mostly whisky. I have seen him drunk. He was drunk at my party, and at Mr. Hook's party, and at other parties.<sup>42</sup>

The next witness called WAS FALLENIS DAUGHTER. She was dressed in neat navy serge costume, blue silk stockings, and black shoes. Her blue hat was trimmed with imitation fruits, and she wore<sup>43</sup> a grey motor veil. **This she carefully kept down over her face all the time, so that not a glimpse of her features could be obtained.**<sup>44</sup> She wept bitterly as she was escorted to a seat near the witness-box by a friend, and continued weeping while giving her evidence.<sup>45</sup> She became quieter for a time, but when asked if she was the daughter of the accused, she burst into tears again, crying loudly.<sup>46</sup> **She sobbed all the time she was giving her answers, and her replies were difficult to understand.**<sup>47</sup>

41. *The Sun*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

42. *The Daily Telegraph*, Friday 20 August, 1920.

43. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

44. *Evening News*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

45. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

46. *The Daily Telegraph*, Friday 22 August, 1920.

47. *Evening News*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

Falleni eyed the girl very closely. She kept tapping her left foot continually on the floor.<sup>48</sup>

**She gave her name as JOSEPHINE CRAWFORD FALLENI and said she lived on Harris Street, Pyrmont. The first she remembered was that her mother used to visit the house where she was brought up.<sup>49</sup>**

Mr Kidston: Where did you first come into contact with Mrs Birkett, afterwards known to you as Mrs Crawford?

Miss Falleni: I can't remember the year.

Mr Kidston: Do you remember how many years it was before 1917?

Miss Falleni: I can't remember at all.

Mr Kidston: How old was Harry Birkett when you first knew him?

Miss Falleni: I don't know. I had very little to do with Harry.<sup>50</sup>

**Mr Kidston: You always knew your mother was a woman?**

**Miss Falleni: Yes.**

**Mr Kidston: She went about in man's clothes?**

**Miss Falleni: Yes.**

**Mr Kidston: When did Mrs. Birkett find the accused was a woman?**

**Miss Falleni: I don't know. She never told me anything about her business.**

**Mr Kidston: Did your mother ever say anything about the police?**

**Miss Falleni: No.<sup>51</sup>**

Mr Kidston: Did she tell you whether Mrs Birkett knew she was a woman?

Miss Falleni: No. She told me nothing at all.

Mr Kidston: Do you remember when it was that Mrs Birkett came to live with your mother as her wife?

Miss Falleni: She was in the shop at Balmain.

Mr Kidston: Were you at the marriage?

Miss Falleni: No.<sup>52</sup>

**Mr Kidston: What did you call your mother?**

**Miss Falleni: I never used to call her anything at all.**

**Mr Kidston: Did she tell you what to call her in Mrs. Birkett's presence?**

**Miss Falleni: No.**

**Mr Kidston: Did you see if they occupied the same bedroom?**

**Miss Falleni: Yes. The same room and the same bed.**

**Mr Kidston: What terms were they on? Did they have rows?**

**Miss Falleni: They used to have rows over me.**

**Mr Kidston: What terms were you on with your mother?**

**Miss Falleni: Not very good terms.**

**Mr Kidston: Did you go to your mother's place at Drummoyne?**

---

48. *The Daily Telegraph*, Friday 22 August, 1920.

49. *Evening News*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

50. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

51. *Evening News*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

52. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

Miss Falleni: Yes, Mrs Crawford was there.

Mr Kidston: Did your mother ever tell you about Mrs Crawford finding out she was a woman?

Miss Falleni: She never told me.

Mr Kidston: Did you ever tell anybody in your mother's presence, at a table, that your mother was a woman, or that Mrs Crawford would find it out?

Mr Gale: Her mother would naturally be a woman.

Mr Kidston: But dressed in men's clothes. (To witness): Did you ever tell anybody in your mother's presence that your mother was a woman, dressed in men's clothes?

Miss Falleni: I don't remember.

Mr Kidston: Did you ever ask your mother about Mrs Crawford's jewellery?

Miss Falleni: No.

Mr Kidston: Do you remember the last time you saw Mrs Crawford?

Miss Falleni: No, I don't remember.

Mr Kidston: Did your mother ever tell you Mrs Crawford had disappeared?

Miss Falleni: No.

Mr Kidston: Do you remember reading in the paper about a body being found in the bush at Chatswood?

Miss Falleni: Yes.

Mr Kidston: Do you remember your mother telling you anything about it?

Miss Falleni: I forget now.

Mr Kidston: Did you ever remember?

Miss Falleni: No, I don't remember at all.

Mr Kidston: Did you ever remember?

Miss Falleni: No, I did not.

Mr Kidston: Do you think you will ever remember?—

Mr Cohen: I object.

Mr Gale: We can't have that, Mr Kidston.

[..]

Mr Kidston: Did your mother ever drink?

Miss Falleni: Not in my company. I never saw her under her influence of drink.

Mr Kidston: Did you ever make a statement to the police?

Miss Falleni: Yes.

Mr Cohen: I object.

Mr Gale (to Mr Kidston): You can only have that fact.

Mr Kidston: (showing witness a document) Will you look at that signature? Is that yours?

Miss Falleni: Yes; I did sign that.

Mr Kidston: That is your signature to the statement you made to the police?

Miss Falleni: Yes.

Mr Kidston: Before you signed it, it was read over to you?

Miss Falleni: Yes, by Detective Robson.

Mr Kidston: Were you satisfied it was correct?



**Mr Cohen:** I object.

(The objection was upheld.)

**Mr Cohen:** In what condition of mind were you when you signed that statement?

**Miss Falleni:** I was too upset.

**Mr Cohen:** Did you understand what Detective Robson was reading at the time?

**Miss Falleni:** I was too upset and sick of it all.<sup>53</sup>

Mr Cohen: Some time ago you received a letter from me, asking you to call at my office?

Miss Falleni: Yes.

Mr Cohen: And I believe you took it to the Police Department, and they advised you?

Miss Falleni: Not to go to your office.

Mr Cohen: What were the rows about between the accused and Mrs Crawford?

Miss Falleni: Mrs Crawford said she didn't get enough board money out of me.

Mr Cohen: Did you ever see Mrs Crawford drink?

Miss Falleni: Yes, beer.

Mr Cohen: Did she take whisky?

Miss Falleni: I never saw her take it, but she smelt of it.<sup>54</sup> **She used to smash up things when she was like that.**

**Mr Cohen:** You remember on one occasion—

(Mr Kidston objected to Mr Cohen breaking new ground in his cross-examination.)

**Mr Gale:** It is quite evident that she is giving evidence willingly now where she was unwilling before, but the poor girl is in a trying position, and I'm sorry for her.

[..]

**Mr Kidston:** Your mother has been dressed as a man ever since you can remember?

**Miss Falleni:** Yes.

**Mr Gale:** I think we will adjourn for lunch now, and that will give the witness a chance to pull herself together.

**Mr Kidston:** She's been crying for three days, and I don't think it will be any better.

After the adjournment, Miss Falleni was asked further questions. She was still sobbing.

**Mr Kidston:** In view of the attitude taken by the present witness towards Mr Cohen and the answers she gave to him, I ask permission to treat the witness as a hostile witness.

**Mr Cohen:** I object for this reason: The unfortunate girl is very upset, and she has answered Mr Kidston to the best of her ability.

[..]

**Mr Gale (to the witness):** I'm very sorry for the position in which you are placed, but in fairness to your unfortunate mother and everybody else we want the whole truth, you understand, and any information you can give. We want to know all about it.

**Mr Cohen:** She's perfectly justified in saying she cannot remember if she can't.

53. *Evening News*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

54. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

**Mr Gale:** No, but if she can she must tell us.<sup>55</sup>

**Mr Kidston:** You said that your mother never drank in your company.

**Miss Falleni:** Yes, it is right.

**Mr Kidston:** You remember making a statement to the police?

**Miss Falleni:** Yes.

A statement was shown to the witness, but she said she did not want to read it. ... Mr Kidston then read the statement, as follows:—

**Mr Kidston:** “My mother often used to smoke a lot, and drink a lot of whisky, and she smelt of whisky a lot.”

Mr. Kidston then asked that the young woman be treated as a hostile witness.

**The Magistrate:** I allow it.

**Mr Cohen:** I formally object to your ruling.

**Mr Kidston:** Did Detective Robson, in the taking of this statement, treat you with harshness or kindness?

**Miss Falleni:** With kindness.<sup>56</sup>

Mr Kidston then asked the witness a few more questions, and tendered the statement made by her to detective Robson.<sup>57</sup>

Mr Gale pronounced that the accused would stand trial at the central criminal court, and bail would be refused.

Leaving court, the young Kidston smiled at Cohen. *Nice try*, the smile said, *but we got around your tricks in the end.*

Winter mutated into Spring. Sunlight pushed against the borders of day and night and Cohen found it harder to sleep. A trial meant life and death stakes, a bigger courtroom, a jury of twelve men whose prejudices and opinions actually mattered. A trial meant a barrister would do all the talking and word on Phillip Street was that William Coyle, K.C.—also known as ‘The Bulldog’—was booked to represent the Crown. How on earth could Sydney’s best barrister be matched? What Cohen needed was a maverick, or some upstart graduate full of bravado and bite, immediately ready to take on the most difficult case of his career. But Cohen would not be the man to decide who should represent his client at trial. No, such decisions were to be made by the Crown, and the Crown chose Archibald McDonell.

Archie McDonell was a man of soft edges. He was not plump, but his gentle eyes, generous moustache and heaviness of step gave the impression he was an eater. Far from the bright-

55. *Evening News*, Thursday 19 August, 1920.

56. *The Daily Telegraph*, Friday 20 August, 1920.

57. *Truth*, Sunday 22 August, 1920.

eyed pup Cohen had hoped for, McDonnell was an old man, but without the experience or wisdom that was the saving grace of old men. He was new to the legal profession and painfully reclusive. Rumour had it he would rather spend an evening in his bedroom at his brother's house (he did not even own his own house) reading through his collection of books on sexual perversion than share a scotch with a colleague at a Phillip Street bar. Anyone would have thought that he—a bachelor at fifty-two—was a sexual pervert himself, but being too shy to meet his kind in the Hyde Park toilets, had to resort to his library for like-minded company. Perhaps he will bring a certain specialised knowledge to the case, Cohen hoped, because by then he could hope for little else.

### THE MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN

We rose early, when the light filtering through the London plane trees was a pale yellow and green. We took the tram into town, or our husbands drove us in on their way to work, or we snaked into town on the train. It was a novelty, seeing the men on their way to work, bleary-eyed in their overcoats and hats. Some of them read the paper. Some of them read cloth-bound books. Some looked out the windows and flicked their eyes past telegraph poles, and the red tiled roofs of houses. How we would have liked to know what they were thinking. Did some of them have mistresses? Secret harems they visited in the privacy of their imaginations? We wondered if they knew we were there, watching.

We arrived at the court when the air was still fresh, and the sandstone steps had not yet been warmed by the sun. We caught each others' eyes. Some of us had never been to a murder trial before, and felt guilty for taking such an interest. Our husbands thought we were morbid—they could not understand it—but we weren't the only ones there. Young men gathered outside the court, too, with bloodlust in their eyes. We all had our own reasons for attending the trial, and few of them were known to us. For some, the man-woman was a thing of wonder. We could not imagine running away to sea, we could not imagine passing as a man through the streets of Sydney, or learning what it is men talk about when we are not around. She had done all these things, and more. Some resented her. We might have wanted to be sailors, too, but were not precocious enough to entertain the fantasy. And what of the daughter? The dead wife? The man-woman's freedom came at great cost to other people. Let that be a lesson.

The lawyers snuck up on us like a stealthy circus in the night. They wore anaemic clown wigs and slapstick gowns that smacked their ankles and rose up in gusts of wind as they ascended the court stairs. When the large metal doors were pushed open, we made our way into the gallery, making new friends as we did. And where did you travel from today? Ashfield. Oh, do you know Mrs So-and-so? Yes, she is on the school committee. Et cetera. If there was a lull in conversation, we marvelled at the building, at the grandness of it. We watched the dock for signs of a small man in a suit, but he never turned up. Instead, at ten o'clock, a woman. She was frail, in black buttoned boots with brown cloth tops, a white linen dress, and a black woollen coat. Her shaking hand was hiding under the lapel of her dress like a mouse under

a leaf. She glanced at our faces, as if they were the faces of cats, with needles for teeth, and sharp, extracted claws.

The barrister for the Crown—the man they called The Bulldog—stood and told us in a loud clear voice that he found it hard to refrain from referring to the accused as a ‘he’, but when he did we were to understand he meant the accused, who posed as a man, and definitely stated that she was a man, and married two different women as a man. So many lies were told, he said. He told the jury they must closely examine all her statements and ask the reason for them. They must ask themselves: why all these lies and subterfuges? But they must not convict on them. He may as well have told them not to think of a white elephant. Don’t, he might have said. No elephants. *Tusk-tusk*.

The Bulldog paused. He looked at us. Was he turning red? He looked like a schoolboy who had seen a woman in a bathing suit for the first time in his life. “There is another matter,” he half-whispered to the judge, “although it is an unpleasant subject to speak of in the presence of women.”

“We must not hesitate for one moment on account of the women,” the judge said. He was wearing a red gown and a white wig. He looked like Father Christmas but less likely to fly through the clouds on a sleigh. “If women choose to come to a Criminal Court,” he said, “they cannot be considered.” We looked at each other and raised our brows. It is funny what men think we shouldn’t know.

The bulldog changed his voice so that it was as cool and loud and strong as a mountain stream. “The accused has been through the form of marriage with two women,” he said, “and later I will suggest something like a motive for getting rid of Mrs Birkett. The accused was so practiced in deceit as to deceive these two women into the belief that she was a man. It was only in the end, when that deceit was discovered, and there were quarrels, that this person sought an opportunity to get rid of the person who would possibly broadcast her deceit.”

We listened to witnesses say what we had already read in the paper. Our eyes wandered. We scrutinised the man-woman’s face to see if she looked guilty, but she only looked calm. *How about now?* we thought, looking quickly to try and catch her out. *Or now?* No, she had turned her face into an iron wall, she was not going to give any more of herself away.

We tried to piece the facts together. Over the 1917 Eight-Hour Day weekend, Harry Crawford had been darting about like a skittish fish. The bulldog was suggesting Crawford went to the river bank three times: to kill his wife on the Friday, to clean away the traces he left behind on the Sunday, and dispose of the body on the Monday. Or maybe he had stayed by the body from Saturday night through to Monday afternoon, is that what he was saying?

When the court adjourned for lunch we cleared the matter up over sandwiches and tea. The gun, we said. Remember, they found a gun in her portmanteau. Alright, so the man-woman shot her ‘wife’ twice through the heart, and burned her chest, and shoved her fist into the blistering wound to pull out the bullets. We shrieked in delight. Oh, how gruesome! One of us choked on a crust and had to be thumped on the back. No, we said, she made the wife drunk with whiskey, or perhaps she poisoned the whiskey, and then shot her through the heart, and when she fell she hit her head on a rock, and then the man-woman doused her in

kerosene and burned her. But there is no evidence of bullets, we said (our tea had gone cold, we pushed it aside) there is no evidence of poison, no evidence of violence. So? Are the only events that happen the events that leave a trace?

After lunch we saw a skull. The real skull of the burned woman. A doctor pulled it out of a box as if he were in *Hamlet* and this was his only scene. We looked to see if the man-woman flinched or winced or blinked out of rhythm. She didn't. This was probably because she had seen it before. It had a large crack up the back. *So there*, The Bulldog seemed to be saying. *There is your evidence of violence.*

The man-woman's barrister, the one who looked more like a walrus than a bulldog, started asking the doctor about men and women, about how some men were more like women, and some women were more like men. He asked the doctor about sexual inversion, and the doctor said yes, a lot of literature had come up, but the red judge didn't know what they were talking about. "Are you setting up insanity or not?" he said to The Walrus. "Oh certainly not," The Walrus said. Then he carried on his conversation with the doctor, asking if it was not a fact that when the hands were extended normally in front of the body, palms upwards, the elbows of a woman were closer together than those of a man. "That might have some bearing on the case if you were setting up insanity, but as you say you are not, I cannot see what it is leading to," the red judge said.

"I want to show," said the walrus, "that the accused had the masculine angle of the arms."

We looked down at our elbows, to see what shapes they made.

As our lunches digested, the afternoon dragged. One of the jurymen yawned. A willy wagtail rested on the windowsill and sang. When a large female witness was asked if she knew the accused, she looked the man-woman straight in the eye and said "I know the accused and she knows me." How many women did this man-woman know, we wondered, and not just know, but *know*? Had we missed out? Was she somehow more potent than the average man?

On the trains and trams that took us home to our husbands we talked. What happened to the girl, we asked. The daughter. She had been a hostile witness at the hearing, there is no way they would bring her back. But some of us missed her. She was beautiful and fierce and fragile. One of us said she had a cousin who had a friend who lived in Darlington, where the daughter lived with Arthur, her husband. Husband? Yes. And guess when they got married? When? The day before she gave evidence at the police court. No! Yes. And she gave evidence as Josephine Falleni, not Whitby, which would have been her proper name. Well. Maybe she thought she could lie under oath if she gave a different name. Poor girl. And my cousin's friend, she says that the man-woman worked her passage from New Zealand on a steamer. She had to sleep with a lead pipe under her pillow, and one day she was in the ship's bathroom when a sailor bashed down the door and had his way with her. So the girl is the product of a rape, then? And do you know something else? The man-woman once stabbed her daughter's beau Arthur with a knife during a fight. No! Yes, possibly because he got the girl into trouble. Or perhaps the man-woman was jealous she didn't have the girl to herself anymore. Or perhaps she did not want the same thing to happen to her daughter that had happened to her in the ship bathroom, who can say?

Once our travelling companions alighted, we had a few moments to ourselves. We had been swept away by the thrill of getting to the bottom of things, but at the bottom of things was a woman who was fierce and fragile and beautiful in her own way, too. We wondered what she was doing. Was she sitting in her cell, rocking back and forth, going over and over the Eight-Hour Day until she had completely forgotten where, or who, she was?

The next morning we heard the policeman, the main policeman. He was big, with a muscular neck and an excellent memory. He could remember when he and Watkins arrested the man-woman and brought her into the station to give a voluntary statement. He remembered when she volunteered to take off her clothes for the government medical officer and then said, "This is a terrible thing for me and the worry of my life". He said they went to the man-woman's house and the wife was there crying, and then they found, in a locked portmanteau, they found—

The Bulldog held a prosthetic phallus by a thin leather strap. He held it out from himself, with his face slightly turned, as if it was a rotting rodent he'd pulled from a drain. He walked towards the jury, to make sure they had seen it. They reeled back, ever so slightly. He turned to face us, and we craned our necks so that we could see past the fascinators and hats. It was large, but not too large. More intriguingly, it was soiled. It was made of rags and capped with rubber. We imagined that it smelled, but of course, from where we were sitting, we couldn't smell a thing. We looked at the man-woman. *Now? Will she cry now?* She looked pale, perhaps. Drained of life, that's all. Now The Bulldog was showing us a gun, but all we could see was that other thing, the 'article'. It was like a gun, in a way. Hard and black and dangerous. We felt a tingle between the legs.

The walrus stood. He said the accused was in a very nervous state, and would make a statement from the dock. *What, we thought, after her phallus has been shown to all and sundry?* We watched her grip the railing hard. She was speaking, apparently, but no one could hear what she said. "Speak up," the red judge said. "Your honour and gentlemen of the jury," she repeated. Her voice was thin, about to break. "I have been three months in Long Bay Gaol and am near a nervous breakdown. I would like to make a statement, but my constitution will not allow me. I do not know anything at all about this charge. I am perfectly innocent, and I do not know what the woman done. We never had any serious rows; only just a few words, but nothing to speak of. Therefore, I am absolutely innocent of this charge against me."

She trailed off and there was a silence. We looked to The Walrus. *Will he ask her any questions? Will he remind her of her lines?* He looked as if he were drowning and praying for a wave to end it quick.

The Walrus called a manufacturer, a Mr David Horace Love. In 1917 he had managed the cornflour mills over the river from where the body was found. He had seen a madwoman about the area, whose appearance matched the description of the burned woman. *What? we thought. Is he trying to say the burned woman was not Annie Birkett at all?* Next it was The Bulldog's turn to ask questions. No, Mr Love said, he could not swear to the woman again. Yes, Mr Love said, he knew that the madwoman had been located.

That was the case for the defence. The Bulldog had called twenty-seven witnesses. The Walrus had called one.

He will fix things, we thought. When he sums up, The Walrus will say it was an accident, that they had gone to the bush to make amends, drank more than they had intended and had a fight. She tried to leave, and he grabbed her by the wrist, and then she fell. She fell and hit her head on a rock, that's what the defence will say. We were on the man-woman's side now, because she was near a nervous breakdown and we felt guilty, just a little, for having wanted her to cry.

The Walrus stood. He cleared his throat. He said it was not only possible, but probable that Mrs Birkett was still living and hiding her identity at the present time. His client was in no way at fault. We should look at the matter from this point of view: if a man commits a murder, he can live again, and in time become respectable; but if he commits a sexual crime, can he lift his head and ever assume respectability? And if a man would be so ostracised, what would happen to a woman when her mistake became public? He asked us these questions, and we weren't sure if he was talking about the man-woman or the wife or who. Then he sat down.

The judge spoke for half an hour and sent the jury on their way. They were young men, and seemed pleased they had been given such an important job. Even the man who had yawned seemed more sprightly now that he was given a task.

The doors of the court were opened and we weren't sure what to do with ourselves. *We have sat here for this long*, some of us thought, *it would be a shame to miss the verdict now*. Yes, but was she guilty of murder beyond reasonable doubt? That would surely take years to determine.

Some of us left. *It will be in the paper in the morning*, those that left thought. *There is no chance we will miss what happened*. And yet some of us felt more useful if we stayed, as if our presence might make a difference somehow, and so those of us with companions ate light meals in cafeterias on Oxford Street and imagined we were the jury, deliberating over the man-woman's guilt.

After our meals we returned to the waiting room, knitting, reading, watching the doors of the court. When they opened, we took our seats in the gallery, a little ashamed at being the last women there. We watched a jurymen hand a slip of paper to a court official, who handed it to the red judge. As he read, he did not give any emotion away. Two young men pulled the black curtains off the wall behind the judge and held them up on either side of his face. From the gallery, he looked like a black, mythical bird, lifting into the clouds.

Then he said it: she was guilty, and would hang from the neck.

The man-woman somehow managed to speak. "I am not guilty, your Honour. I know nothing whatsoever of this charge. It is only through false evidence that I have been convicted."

Some of us were glad she had got what she deserved.

Some of us were sick to our stomachs.

---

We could feel the skin beneath our collars. How tender it was, how soft. For a second we thought we could feel the scratch of a rope being slipped around our necks.



---

# THE INVERT

## LONG BAY GAOL, 1929

### DR MORAN

It was acting from an impulse provoked in him by his old friend W. T. Coyle, once Crown Prosecutor at Sydney, now a Criminal Court judge, that Moran first went to see her. Coyle knew that he possessed some Italian, and thought that it might bring her a crumb of comfort to have a visit from someone who could understand her in her own Tuscan language (for she had the Tuscan tongue, if not the Roman mouth of the proverb). It was in his Irish way, you know, first to prosecute the poor creature successfully—was there ever a greater prosecutor in Sydney?—and then to send his kindly wife and some of his friends to ease for her the pain of imprisonment.

The Long Bay penitentiary stood like a fortress on the coast a few miles south of Sydney. The Pacific Ocean at its back door, as if to provide a contrast of turbulence unharnessed. The day W. J. McKell, M.L.A., gave Moran a pass to enter it, all was bright and cheerful until the key grated and the iron gates swung back. Then a wind—a cheerless wind—blew upon him. The dejection of the prisoners, their hang-dog looks, their earthly complexions in spite of the exposure to sunlight, the dull eyes of those who were obviously practising the solitary vice, the slow footsteps which had lost all alertness—all these things appalled him. Existence itself had a growth of green mould upon it.

Dr Moran and a benevolent matron awaited Eugenia Falleni in the reception-room. She came in shyly and suspiciously, a woman of fifty-four years. The stature was short and the gait slouching. She still seemed to be deliberately exaggerating the stride of a man. The grey eyes were restless and afraid, the face olive-tinted, lined, hairless. Such a head would easily pass for a man's. Her hair indeed was still short. It was brushed straight back and there were patches of grey. The nose was thick and undistinguished. She was flat in the bust. The voice was low-pitched and raucous, the manner subservient but distrustful. The hands were large and spade-like, suggesting those of a manual labourer.

He told her his mission was to help her in any way he could (at that time he had foolish ideas of getting her returned to her native country). She replied cautiously complaining chiefly of the monotony. She said she was there "only on suspicion" (which was not true and which

no intelligent person would have affirmed). She was always deceiving herself as to reality. But all the time she remained on guard, watching Moran narrowly.

He was not competent in the modern researches which had made so great a contribution to knowledge of psychical phenomena. It appeared at times like an unlighted dungeon from which came scurrying forth the famished rodents of the senses. He could not say then if Falleni's perversion was, or was not, a perturbation of the Oedipus complex. He did not know if, in hiding herself from the realities of her environment, she was seeking refuge under the maternal skirts and near a mother's breast. This, at least, seemed clear: obviously this was a woman with the mental capacity of some lower animal. She had none of the brilliant attainments of so many perverts. Nor was she aggressively masculine. There was nothing of the bearded woman about her. She had no religious sentiments of any kind, and not the slightest evidence of any spirituality. She was just a half-wild creature who felt herself apart and different, who had grown cunning and furtive, hiding her secret and satisfying her needs. She must have gone always harassed with fear, for Eugenia Falleni was a homosexualist. She had murdered the woman whom she married—the word of course is inexact—and who at last had become aware of her guilty secret. A panic of fear had then invaded her. She became like a creature which, cornered, turns with her savage claws on the pursuer. Society had been hunting her all these furtive years. Society had been persecuting her—she was not conscious of any real wrong-doing. It was those others who were at fault, those others who were all out of step.<sup>58</sup>

---

58. Adapted from Moran, Dr Herbert M. 'Portrait of an Invert', *Viewless Winds: Being the Recollections and Digressions of an Australian Surgeon*. London: P. Davies 1939, 230–250.

**JEAN FORD**

**AS FAR AS SHE CAN REMEMBER**

---

# DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

## SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

### LONG BAY

**Harry Cox:** Journalist for *The Sun*.

**J. D. Corbett:** Journalist for *Smith's Weekly*.

**Pretty Tilly Devine:** Gangster, prostitute,  
brothel madam, and frequent inmate at  
Long Bay Penitentiary.

\* **Mavis:** Warder at Long Bay Penitentiary.

**Dr Herbert Michael Moran:** M.D., Italo-  
phile, friend of William Coyle, K.C., and  
author of the memoir *Viewless Winds*.

**Mrs Dorothy Mort aka Lady Diana Reay:**  
Aspiring actress and murderess from the  
North Shore.

**All names marked with \* are inventions.**

## SYDNEY HOSPITAL, JUNE 9, 1938

- Who is she?
- Not sure. Hit by a car up on Oxford Street.
- No purse?
- No. A wad of cash, though. £100.
- Stolen?
- Probably.
- *What is your name, Mrs ... ?*—I don't think she can hear me.
- No, her eyelid twitched. Did you see that? Her eyelid twitched.
- *Mrs? Can you hear me? What is your name?*

My name, my name. What should we say my name is today, little Rita?

Today it is Jean, I think, but tomorrow, when I find you, we will christen me something new—something you can decide because my new life will be lived for you and no one else.

A name is a lie, Rita, remember that. If none of us had names, how would we remember who each other were? How would we call to each other from across the street? How would we attach a face to a name, a name to a bank account? I tell you, we couldn't. We couldn't even tell our own stories, because stories need heroes, and heroes would not hold together without a name, they would fall to jelly on the floor most likely, and wouldn't that be delicious?

We had jelly sometimes at Long Bay, when the swan ladies put on afternoon teas. They brought small white cakes, and strung white flowers all about the exercise yard, and wore white dresses and one lady—we called her the Silver Lining because she had a silver streak running through her hair like a racing stripe. She was racing the rest of us to heaven, although it seemed to us as if she already lived there. But then she would leave and we would stay and sneeze from the dying flowers as they dropped their petals on the ground.

*Who I am, you cannot know,  
for Jean Ford is my name.  
Like Fords they make in factories,  
my selves all look the same.*

The doctors will think: a sensible name for a sensible woman, and let me out.

So call me Jean.

Can you hear me? I am Jean, Jean Ford.



They can't hear me.

And there's a loud white pain flaring out from my hip and the back of my head that makes it hard to speak. Don't. No, stop. Morphine will only make me slip further away. I want to be inside this pain, because it's mine, because it proves this broken body's still got fight.

They are pressing into my wrist with their cold fingers. They are feeling for a pulse. They are saying numbers and writing on paper. Ha. Do monsters have pulses? I can hear someone fingering my banknotes. Don't you dare, don't you bloody dare, that's everything I've got.

What was it—twenty years ago now?—I was about to die under a different name. I travelled to Long Bay Penitentiary like a celebrity, on a tram with tinted windows. Instead of a destination, the tram said *SPECIAL*. The woman next to me couldn't stop giggling. *Never thought I'd get called special, that's for sure.*

Inside the tram we didn't feel special. We got shoved ten at a time into compartments with seats for four and clung to the chicken-wire gates that fenced us in. A woman moaned the whole way there, like a cow torn away from her calf.

—*Ah shuddup Sandra, ya whiney bugger—*

Bugger the morphine, I am clinging now: onto the hollow coughs resounding in the bedpans, the groans of the crook woman next to me, the rattle of a metal bed wheeled down the hall. I've been in a hospital before, long ago now, but it is all coming back—

Riding the tram to gaol the pain I felt was too big for moans. With Lizzie gone, and my daughter given up on me, I had no one to live for—but even so I didn't want to die at the hands of old men in white wigs, and what were they hiding under there anyway? If I was going to go, it would be by my own hand, thanks all the same.

Long Bay had never kept a woman about to hang and they weren't sure where to put me. They settled on a concrete cell, thirteen feet by seven. I got a mug and spoon, a shelf, and a single bulb hanging from the roof. I could have wrapped the light cord around my neck and jumped off the shelf I suppose, but what if the cord broke and left me lying on my back, more alive than dead, legs twitching like a poisoned cockroach?

I lay on my bed and stared at the ceiling. The cell was like a roomy coffin, and I was almost convinced I was already dead, when I heard a warder whisper outside my door: *Maybe they'll send her to Hall B in the men's.*

I could tell by the break in her voice what happened in Hall B.

They lowered their voices whenever they passed my cell as if I was a ghost likely to haunt any poor sucker who pricked my ears. I probably would have too, I was that hungry and sore about it.

They say you eat whatever you want when you're about to hang, but it turns out this is a lie. They'd fed me Ration One for supper, the next best thing to dry bread and water. I suspect

they didn't want to clean up my shit after I dropped. A constipated corpse is a tidy corpse, and doesn't leave a trace.

But everything leaves a trace. You might not be able to see those traces, but you can feel them, you can smell them. There are traces of me in you, and mark my words there are traces of me in the acid that burns the Crown Prosecutor's gullet at night, keeping him awake.

*Wake up, Mrs; Mrs, wake up,* a nurse is saying.

Ah, darling girl, I would if I could.

Now she is giving up, too. Her soft shoes pad across the floor.

The concrete floors, the single file lines, the mosquitoes that rose in clouds from the drains—to execute a person at Long Bay Gaol is worse than killing your wife in a drunken rage at a picnic and is much worse than not killing your wife and getting told by all of Sydney that you did.

I hope you never believed those stories about your grandma, Rita; it is important to me that you don't. I almost began to believe them myself when Sydney's million eyes twinkled in the electric courtroom light. Thinking of those eyes now, it's hard not to imagine them attached to butchers' aprons and bloodied arms clutching spears and stun guns. I was supposed to make a statement from the dock, but standing there in my meat and bones, all I could see were the jurymen's smug faces grimacing at the sight of my member dangled before them—a poor cousin to what they had between their legs—and my mouth could not make a sound. Every word was suddenly right and wrong depending on how it came out, and I was stuck and drowning in the lost eyes of my barrister.

My gun and thing they found in the box made the jury sure I killed her. By the looks on their faces, you would have thought my member fired bullets out of its rubber shaft. Obsessed with secrets, people are. If I was a woman in man's clothes, there must have been other bad things I was hiding, too, things I'd want to kill to protect. They didn't think that my woman's skin was hiding another true thing that the man's clothes were bringing out. *Did you want to be a man, then?* the cops asked, confused, and what to say? *No? I don't know?*

All I knew is I wasn't good at being the way a woman was supposed to be, so I tried the only other option and it was better, for a time.

All I know is, if Harry Crawford had been on trial, they would never have sent him to hang.

That barrister they gave me was not so easily put off. He was waiting for me in the prison interview room the very next morning.

*Fight them,* he said. *I know you want to give up, but we have to fight them, not just for you, but for inverts everywhere.*



He couldn't stop mopping his brow and dropped my case file on the floor so that the pages lost their order. His cheeks burned red, and he apologised to his shoes because he couldn't look me in the face after we had lost.

*We*, he said. He didn't want to feel he'd failed alone.

*You were convicted on circumstantial evidence. Circumstantial evidence!*

His eyes were wet, and I wondered if he was about to cry.

I took his hand—something we weren't supposed to do in case forbidden things passed from palm to palm.

*It's alright, Mr McDonell*, I said. *You did everything you could.* Which wasn't saying very much at all.

He appealed—or *we* appealed—and lost.

The warders bit their nails when I looked them in the face. They barked occasionally, to remind me where I was, but it was hard for them to keep up the gruffness when I gave them no reason to complain. Mavis slipped a ball of tobacco into my pocket. May gave me an extra scoop of hominy on Sundays, and in early December a young warder slid back the hatch on my cell door.

*Good news, love*, she said. *There was a cabinet meeting. Your death sentence just got commuted to life.*

*What?* I didn't understand. What about the jury's decision? The lawyers' two hour speeches? The months of preparation for the trial, and all along they could change their minds, just like that?

*No premier wants a hanged woman on his hands, not now we can vote.*

So it was life, then. Sentenced to life. It was worse in a way, but the women in the cells began to clap. The sound was water smacking stone; the drops accumulated and became rain. They clapped harder, they whooped and hollered—the cheers of women wild or poor enough to break the law are as close to rapture a person can get now that churches don't mean much.

My cheeks were wet, my throat choked up; I hadn't cried like that in years.

*Sister, the old woman is crying, I think.*

The nurses are coming from all directions, needles out.

No, no more morphine.

Too bad. Jab.

And off I float. I have been in a hospital before, long ago now, but it is all coming back.

I spent the first few months of my new life sentence swallowing snail pellets in the prison fernery, or sneaking sips of detergent in the kitchen. Eventually, the old bod got the hint and ran with it. I was wheeled into the hospital wing. My insides were being scoured out, that's how it felt, and the doctors thought they'd help the process along by forcing vials of bitter

medicine down my throat. Soon only my skin would remain: a costume to wear at Halloween. *Look, it's the man-woman!* an excitable child might shout, but no one would believe him. By then my skin would be that of a shrivelled up old lady—a spinster aunt or a librarian or a nun—as interesting as dregs of tepid tea left in the bottom of cups. Not a man, never a murderer, nothing as exciting as that.

A nurse pressed her fingers into my stomach to watch me wince, then whispered, *Cancer*.  
A terminal illness. What a relief!

It turned out cancer was an alien creature, living off my stomach acid, knocking me out for days at a time. And as the weeks dragged on I wished it could have been a little more clear about when it was planning to terminate.

When I came to, I watched the walls move under their bugs. What never moved were two rows of steel cot beds, their starched sheets tucked stiffly in. Down my end was a curtained-off corner, the curtains embroidered with cross-stitched religious scenes. I saw Jesus wash Mary Magdalene's feet before a gust blew the curtains back, revealing the drawn face of a woman sitting on the bed beside me. I wondered if she was an angel. Her face was long and thin, her nose beak-like; the curtains moved like wings. She sat, staring at the medicine cabinet on the far wall.

*Mary*, I said.

She did not flinch.

*Mary*, I said again.

I felt a rush of love for her, possibly because I'd rolled off my morphine drip, but at the time, with the light shifting from white to yellow in her wings, I thought this woman could save me. She rose and walked towards the locked cabinet on the far side of the room. Was she walking? She seemed to float. She scanned the room slowly, coolly, then picked the lock with a bobby pin drawn from her mass of dark, wavy hair. She took a vial from the cabinet, drank it, replaced it with something hidden in her blouse, locked the cabinet and floated back.

*What did you put in there?* I thought, or maybe asked.

*Don't worry*, she said, *only something I found in the cleaning cupboard. Nothing you people could distinguish from the filth you drink at the pub.*

When I next opened my eyes she was unconscious. Her nose was an arrow aimed straight at God.

Later, I woke to hear the woman sobbing, to see the bones of her spine nudging up against the silk of her petticoat—silk, not the rough cotton of our nightshirts. The sharp blades of her shoulders rose and fell, almost cutting the silk from underneath. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, hooked over, facing the wall. She had a cathedral dome for a sinus, her sobs lifted towards the roof like miserable angels of their own.

*Are you alright?* I asked.

She couldn't hear me.

*Mrs, what is your name?*

She stopped sobbing for a moment. *Di*, she said. *Lady Diana Reay.*

*And what is the matter, Lady Reay?*

*They hate me, she said.*

*Who hates you?*

*All of them. They snigger behind their hands when they come to the library.*

I'd heard of Lady Reay. She was an aspiring film actress from Sydney's North Shore. She didn't have to sew buttonholes on pillowcases or clean out the loos. When she was well, she got to be prison librarian. And she slept in the hospital wing whether she was ill or not, never in the cold stone cells below.

*I guess you're a novelty, I said. A lady from the north side of the harbour.*

*Yes, in this place I am even more of a novelty than the wife-killing man-woman.*

My cancer throbbed, releasing a wave of nausea as it did. Lady Reay turned, saw my pale face, and lifted her hand to her mouth.

*Oh, she said. That's you? But you are just an old woman, you look nothing like a man.*

*Thank you, I said. I supposed she'd meant it as a compliment. You can call me Jean.*

She turned her back on me again, hung her head low. *I am terrible at this.*

*What, talking to people?*

*Yes, she said. I suppose they are people.*

The light behind her dimmed then flared. Her wings quavered. She lifted her head to the pale green light coming in from the high window.

*Finally, a storm, she said. These are the wildest moments of my life, now.*

The first drop hit the roof, dragging others down with it. They rattled in the gutters like pebbles thrown from the clammy fists of little boys. The sound filled the ward, and it was the closest thing to silence you could hope for in a place like that.

*Thank you, she said over the roar. This has been a comfort to me, Jean. This little chat.*

When I was well enough I was allowed to meet Lady Reay in the library between two and four, before I was locked up with my conscience and supper for the night. Yes, Rita, we had a library and even a fernery, but it was hardly a holiday camp.

The library was where the prison's dust gathered to mate—under dustjackets, between pages—and if you opened a book it escaped into the air only to hang, unsure of where to go next. Lady Reay ordered me to sit at a table piled high with newspapers. On top: a photograph. Two men, one short and tense, one bulky as a rugby thug. I knew the angle of the small man's cocked fedora, remembered the feel of that sweaty hatband against my forehead. It was a picture of Harry Crawford leaving court with Detective Robson. The picture was only months old, but the small man in it was so different to the woman looking at it now, in grey cotton dress, with grey hair long enough to curl behind the ear.

The next paper also boasted Harry Crawford's face. There were hundreds of newspapers open at pictures of Harry Crawford, and too many Crawfords, all of them slightly obscured. As Lady Reay proudly pointed out, some were from as far afield as Western Australia.

I closed my eyes to shut them out and felt Lady Reay watching for signs I might break down. Perhaps she was as mad as her lawyers had made out.

*I think it's time you took charge of all this, don't you?* she said.

I thought there was nothing more they could do to me now, but there was. They could take what life I'd lived and cut it to bits, then twist each bit into a sinister, mangled mess. These Crawfords lived their own lives, separate from mine. I looked at them from high up, outside of time and my own skin. I read syllable-by-syllable, each detail stretched out, stammered through, wrangled by the tongue. Lady Reay sat patiently by, her long breasts resting on the table, her neck craning over the paper in front of us.

*The tree ... al ...*

*Trial*, said Reay.

*Trial off ...*

*Of*, said Reay.

*The trial of Eugene Falleni, the ...*

*Man-woman.*

*Man-woman ... on ... the k-ha ... k-har ...*

*Charge. C-h is ch.*

*Charge off ...*

*Of—*

It was exhausting, but I wanted to know what happened next. Would your mother testify against her own trouser-wearing mother? What would Lydia say, who had been Crawford's closest friend? There was a chance they'd say something different in the world of paper and ink.

Two weeks of reading lessons was all it took for the cancer to return. The pain was easy to ignore while scrubbing pans in the kitchen, but in the library Harry Crawford twisted the wedding band around his finger as he waited for his hearing to start, and I was standing in the dock again, searching for Lizzie's plump cheeks, her earnest Scottish brow, her gloved hands clutching the handle of her handbag propped on her lap as if it was holding her together. I never did see her for the parade of former friends taking it in turns to stand in my line of sight and speak as if Harry Crawford had never minded their kids or shared a scotch; as if they'd never felt anything resembling an emotion in their lives. How eager they all were to be part of the show.

Soon I was down one end of the hospital wing again. The doctor was playing the role of a man at peace with the company of prisoners, but behind his composed face he was mentally checking that his wallet was safely out of reach of the grasping, grubby fingers of convict women.

*Mrs ... ?* he checked his clipboard. *Falleni?*

*Yes—?*

*You will have to stop imbibing cleaning products if you want your condition to improve.*

*Doctor—?*

*We've run tests*, he said. *I've no idea how you've managed to smuggle mouthfuls of the stuff, considering we've a warder watching you twenty-four hours a day.*

A warder was, in fact, sitting in a hard-backed wooden chair where Reay's bed had been. The warder scratched her fingernail around the inside rim of her nostril, inspected her findings, flicked them onto the floor.

*Where is Lady Reay?*

*Who?* the warder asked. *No ladies here, love.*

*Lady Diana Reay. Where is she?*

*Oh, her.* The warder laughed. *That's Mrs Dorothy Mort.*

The warder said Mrs Mort's expensive lawyers got her off a murder charge by claiming she was mad. The warder said she called herself Lady Reay and shot her doctor lover in the parlour of her Lindfield home. The warder said she spent Sundays reading poetry in bed because she didn't like the way the prison chaplain pronounced his vowels. The warder said she was highly educated. *And look where it got her.*

I wondered if, when a woman with a nose like Reay's looked up, even just to make out the pattern of a stain on the ceiling, it would be hard not to think she was giving herself airs. Even so, there's something about a proud woman that gets me on my knees. I want to build pedestals for them, so that they never have to see how grotty the world really is.

That night, I dreamt of Daisy, for the first time since she left.

That house of ours was a cold dark place full of cheap furniture, but the way Daisy cleaned, it always looked brand new. My face looked back at me from every polished surface and I felt as if I couldn't sit down anywhere, or play music on the wireless in case it made the curtains flutter out of their folds. After a few drinks she'd loosen up, and maybe sit on my lap on the front porch for the whole street to see. But something died in her after I lost my job; it didn't matter how many glasses of ale I poured, she sat stiff and cold as a frozen pig on the hook.

Hooked on songs my next wife was. After Daisy's icy silence, Lizzie was my barrel organ wife. She hummed tunes under her breath and our curtains always danced.

After she left I decided to build a wall inside myself, with music on one side, where it could play without me having to hear it.

But then sometimes it would come at me from the outside.

My wall was still hardening when the gangster Pretty Tilly organised the first concert for us. She treated her Long Bay stints like well deserved R&R and this time she was going to have the best singers you'd ever pay two pounds to see in the posh theatres of Sydney.

*Are you coming to the concert?* was all she asked anyone. *Are you coming? Are you coming? I got youse the next best thing to Dame Nellie, you'd be a fucken deadshit if ya didn't go.*

I shook my head. Too old for concerts.

*Don't give me that shit, Jeanie.*

I smiled, or the muscles contracted on my face—I couldn't tell the difference any more.

Everyone had to go to the concert, even Lady Reay. If you didn't go, Pretty Tilly would take it personal. There'd be a mix up in the kitchen: concrete dust in the hominy, gravy in your underwear.

*I pulled a lot of strings to get these girls to come out here and sing to you, so you—*  
 She coughed up a fruity one. At twenty-five, her voice was already curdled with phlegm.  
*Alright, I said. What's the worst that could happen?*  
*Exactly.*  
 She cocked her head, sweet as a puppy that just shat on the floor.

We sat on wooden benches straight as church pews and even the warders seemed uneasy. The skills of the theatre usherette were not part of their job descriptions.

*Sit down and shut up and if you even think of heckling there'll be no more concerts, you got it?*

That was Mavis, number one warder. She seemed nervous that we might start enjoying ourselves—or, worse, that she might crack a smile, and the smile would lead to God knows what carefree emotions cart-wheeling up to her tear ducts. What if she cried in front of us? Her eyes moved from face to face, looking for a whisper to catch.

Pretty Tilly had it worked so we got the most handsome couple currently treading the Tivoli boards. No nightclub tarts for us. They were decked out in diamonds and furs and really gave the first-timers something to daydream about. *You could dress like this too if you worked for me*, those furs said.

The man at the piano began with such gusto that the warder who played hymns winced with every clang, but the young girls up the front jiggled their shoulders in time to the sounds and looked at each other and clapped their hands.

*Oh, this one! I love this one!*

The look on Pretty Tilly's face was that of a shark who'd just cruised past a school of bream.

The singer's first notes quivered over our heads like bubbles frightened of popping and I was taken off to the Coogee Palace Aquarium with Lizzie, my hands small on her generous arse. She showed me how to dance and laughed at the stiffness of my shuffle across the floor. She'd wanted to be out amongst young things jostling across the dance floor, each woman the star of her own penny romance, and so Lizzie moved me through clusters of sideways glances, her own eyes stubbornly looking straight into mine. What could she see there? Only what she needed, because she smiled, her teeth all angles, her cheeks as round as puddings, in love with her Harry.

Her Harry. No one else's, not even mine.

Around us drifted schools of tropical fish dozing in water murky with their own shit. There must have been a thousand bright humans in that aquarium-walled room, the notes of the band floating up, up, up.

*By the sea, by the sea, by the beautiful sea,  
 You and me, you and me, oh how happy we'll be!  
 When each wave comes a-rolling in,*

*We will duck or swim,  
And we'll float and fool around the water.  
Over and under, and then up for air,  
Pa is rich, Ma is rich, so now what do we care?  
I love to be beside your side, beside the sea,  
Beside the seaside, by the beautiful sea.*

And afterwards, outside, eating ices with our toes in the sand, she said, *I'll look after you like a wife, but if they ever find you out I'll say I never knew.*

I should have told her that she was not the first, that Daisy had tried and not lasted the distance, but I only said, *Of course.*

A wave licked the sand along the shoreline and I thought of her toes, how they would taste. My skin tingled like algae lighting up at night. It will be different this time, I told myself, because by then it was impossible to tell myself anything else.

That conversation eventually weathered away and it got to a point where I—then Harry—couldn't be sure it had happened.

I played to our story. Took care to strap on my member with the door locked, in case she stumbled in to see how alien the thing was that gave her pleasure. But she knew. Of course she knew. How could she not have known? She must have unlearned the knowledge, so she didn't have to feel so strange.

One year was all it took for her fake husband to turn real.

*I'm pregnant!* she said one morning, her teeth in an akimbo grin.

She went red because pregnant made her think of what we'd done in bed for her to end up that way.

She was almost telling the truth. We had both given each other a feeling as new and fragile as an egg. We spoke to each other tenderly, in case it should break.

Where was Lizzie now? I imagined her walking to the edge of that rickety pier at Coogee, the pylons collapsing under the heaviness left in her when they took me away.

I heard her howling in the foyer of the C.I.B. from my corner of the overnight cell, two stories below sea level.

*Christ*, an old drunk said. *Sounds like a whale giving birth up there.*

A girl pissing in the corner laughed.

I could have smacked their criminal heads together, but I was heavy myself and could not move.

Like Daisy before her, Lizzie was older than me. She knew more than me, but she did not know how to swim. Maybe drowning for her would be like dancing for me: spinning delirious past the blank stares of fish.

*By the sea, by the sea, by the beautiful sea / You and me, you and me, oh! How happy we'll be,*  
the couple sang last. The skin beneath my eyes began to twitch. A warder was watching. *Don't cry. Don't cry now.*

*Talentless tarts*, Lady Reay said on our way out of the hall. All the same it took me two days to recover. Sentimental songs are unnatural spells. They make your blood flow backwards, your memories start speaking in tongues. I was not strong enough for Pretty Tilly's concerts.

*What's the worst that could happen?* I'd asked.

Two wives dead, over and over. That's all.

After the concert I didn't sleep right. And the problem with not sleeping right in a place where every day is the same is that days take on the feel of dreams, and dreams become as dull as days. One moment no longer leads to another; it threads back into itself, from the future into the past, like the backstitch on Lady Reay's curtains.

I was in the prison fernery, with a frond curled around my finger. A currawong descended from the sky. He'd found something in the tree fern—a matted feathery thing. Walking closer, I could see that it was the nest of a small bird; walking closer still, I could see how the feathers came to a smooth red point, as if they'd been dipped in blood. The currawong cocked his head, and I knew what he was about to do before he did it. He took the nest in his beak and tore at it. He shook the pieces away, gripped the nest and, eyeing me, tore at it again. I couldn't see any reason for the bird to do this. Unless, of course, it had been his own nest.

To start again, Rita, I'll start with you.

I'd known you were about to be born because your mother wrote, asking if I was on a prison pension and if so could I help her out the way a mother should when her daughter's up the duff. Well I wasn't, and I couldn't, but I would've liked to see her none the less.

I planted a sapling in the fernery the day you were born and spoiled the fragile thing nearly to death with all the chicken shit it could absorb into the threads of its roots.

If it sprouted a new leaf, I imagined you had likewise grown a tooth.

You wouldn't be that little now.

By now you can probably walk and talk, can probably read and write. My God, I've never stopped to think, but you would be, what, fifteen? Sixteen? Maybe you are married! Don't get married, Rita. You'll only end up having visions of your spouse lying dead in every room of the house. I tried to say as much to your mother, but she never did listen.

Josephine, my changeable daughter. I can't shake the sweet smell of pigs' innards from the memory of her. She looked like a page two girl from the magazines, even in a blood-smeared apron with her hair shoved up under a net. There was a rage in her that crackled under the skin, like a wireless being tuned. She hadn't found a frequency that made her sing, but the crackle kept her sharp for men and girlfriends eager to have adventures they could blame on a bad influence. One week she'd be living in Marrickville, another in Pymont, another in Darlington, always chasing that boy Arthur. He was a gunner in the Navy, she said. He got



his charm from the same sea she thought her father vanished into—it was too late to tell her anything different.

*Who was he?* she asked when she was little. We delivered laundry to the houses around Double Bay and the driving was long, the questions inevitable.

I told her about the steamer that went the wrong way to Sydney—from Wellington via London. I told her I saw the Queen at her silver jubilee, and that she looked like an old toad dressed up in lace and a hoop skirt big enough to hide a family of twelve.

*Tell me who he was,* she said, and I said I thought England would have been everything New Zealand only dreamed it could be, because anyone who was from there looked at you all smug if you said you were from anywhere else. They shared a secret, those people, a special mark in their blood. But when I got there it turned out to be a vague, grey country where the rain didn't fall so much as hover above the ground. Children worked in factories and everyone got by on bread and dripping if anything at all, unless you were the Queen. In that case you got by on children basted in bacon fat. It was no wonder half of England came to live on the far side of the world, where the sky was big and bold and there was space enough to be whoever you damn well wanted to be.

*That's not true,* she said. *You never visited the Queen.*

*You bet I did,* I said.

She sulked, so I told her about the island traders I met in the Pacific on the way back; I told her about how they dived for pearls when pearls were still plentiful and offered themselves up in clams the size of dinner plates.

*Just tell me his name, then,* she said, exhausted, because by then we had arrived at a house and she knew I'd use the unloading of sheets as an excuse to change the subject.

*Martello,* I said. *Captain Martello.* It was a grand-sounding name, just like she would have wanted.

A name was never enough.

Even after she fell in love with Arthur, the idea of him at least, she had to know the sight of her could wind every man in the street. If not, something needed fixing. Her hem was too low. Her feet too flat. The sheen of her eyes too dull.

*Nina,* she announced when we worked side-by-side in the meatworks. *I'm gonna take up a typing career.*

*Yeah?* I said. Her hands were gloved in pig grease. I couldn't imagine them any other way.

*Yes,* she said, throwing a scrap of skin on the floor. *Why don't you ever believe me?*

There was no use responding. I wanted to believe her, which was almost as good, but it was never good enough.

Those were our closest years. She couldn't leave in a huff; we could only look at the frozen meat as we passed it under the saw.

She never did come to visit me in gaol. Our love, if you could call it that, was a mess of finger pointing, fierce loyalty and silence.

I wished we could start again.

The beginning is a hard place to start. And now my toes are freezing and try as I might I can't warm them, can't even wiggle them. I can feel the cold skin of them, but can't see it, can't shift it. My toes must have turned blue by now, they must be smoking like dry ice. You'd think a nurse would notice the smoke, notice the serious reduction in temperature my toes have caused in the ward. I can feel all this, but I can't move a muscle.

A muscle. A twitch of that tiny blue muscle under her flat foot. She hadn't been able to move then, either, I was holding the pillow down that hard, but then that twitch of her muscle. It was so particular. She wasn't a baby any more, she was a person, my daughter—a very particular person, and when I let the pillow go, her chest flooded with life.

Now it aches, my chest. There is phlegm building up behind my sternum, but I can't cough, can't shift it. I'm drowning in battlefield mud. *Suck it out of me*, I want to say, but I can't and even if I could they wouldn't listen.

*Listen*, I would say to her now, instead of holding the pillow down. Listen, we can work it out together. I can be the father you always wanted. Listen, stop crying, let me paint him for you:

*He will be a strong man. He will be small, sure, but let's call him lithe. He will have delicate features—let's call them boyish. He won't be able to read a word, but you can be in charge whenever there's some reading to be done.*

*In return, he'll show you how to fend for yourself, in a world that wants you to cower.*

I remember the day I found out my baby died. It was hot at Long Bay, and for all her airs and graces, Lady Reay smelled ripe. In the library, the newspapers crackled at the touch. It was too hot to talk, so I didn't think much of Reay's silence when she set down a newspaper open at the obituaries. A strange choice for a reading lesson I thought, until I saw her name:

**Whitby, Josephine Rita.**

**Beloved wife of Arthur. 26.**

Tuberculosis, they said. She suffocated to death.

In the fernery your leaves curled up, clutching at nothing but air.

Over the months that followed I found it was best to stay out of the way of other people, in case they reminded me of someone or something or stirred the silt that had gathered at the pit of my stomach. Journalists asked after me at the front desk and the warders met their questions with blank stares the way I'd suggested. *Scare the vultures off with silence*, I'd said. *I don't know what to tell them, and they'll only write the story the way they want anyway.*

Lady Reay played a very different game. She had her friends write to the papers and anyone else important enough to be effective. They gave details—of her illness, prison life,

how she was struggling—and gradually the accumulation of words turned like a flock of gulls on the wind. She was no longer a middle-class murderess, she was a fragile woman wrongly incarcerated, and lo and behold she was released.

I began to wet myself. Little drops that only came out when I coughed, but I suppose I was coughing a great deal at the time.

*Poor dear,* the warders said as I bundled up my damp bedding in the morning, *she's lost another queer chook and now she's falling apart.*

They gave me Reay's library job to cheer me up. What they didn't know is I wasn't pining for Reay. I was furious. She'd killed her lover just as I had supposedly done. The difference was, there was no doubt at all she had done it. The pieces of her story lined up, there were no jarring contradictions. She was a spoiled brat who couldn't have the man she wanted, and so she shot him twice in the brain and through the heart as well. Nine years later she was released.

*Perhaps it's time to tell them how it happened,* Mavis said.

*And how was that?*

*You know,* she said. *Whatever it needs to have been to get you out before you die.*

I shrugged.

*Think of your granddaughter,* she said. *Wouldn't you like to see her?*

Right then. What it needs to have been.

When the police showed me where the burned woman was found, I was supposed to remember the long walk through the scrub. Why this spot for the picnic? Had I convinced myself the smell would not be streaming from the chimneys of the cornstarch mills across the river because it was a public holiday? Did I choose that spot because I thought I could lift her into one of the furnaces at the paper mills nearby?

Who planned it all: the picnic, the fire, the direction of the wind?

Wouldn't I like to know.

Wouldn't they just kill to know.

I told the warders: *Alright, I'll try to talk.*

For Rita, you understand.

The first man who came was a doctor I had never met before. He sat awkwardly in the reception room, beside a warder trying not to smile at his awkwardness.

I told him the parts of my story I could remember—mainly things I'd read about in the papers. I assumed they were the things people wanted to hear, but he seemed unimpressed, like he'd heard it all before.

*Why are you here, then?* I might have asked him.

He blundered through some sentences. Something about sending me back home.

*And where is that?*

He spoke slowly, in a clipped Italian learned from books. *Italia, avrei pensato ... ?*

*My Italian is very rusty,* I said. *Seeing as I left the place when I was two.*

He lowered his notebook. *Mr Coyle arranged the visit,* he said.

I said nothing.

*You know, the prosecuting lawyer in your trial?*

How could I forget?

*I hope that hasn't put you off speaking to me?*

My cell's stone walls were warmer company.

*Coyle meant for no harm to come to you,* he said. *He feels sorry. He was only doing his job.*

Oh really? What a relief.

Hours later, the doctor returned in my sleep.

*Would your faces like the chance to be killed?* he asked.

The offer seemed sensible enough.

*We're all going to die sooner or later. Probably when we least expect it. Would they prefer to control the timing of their deaths? To take the element of uncertainty away from the fear of their inevitable end?*

To my surprise, all my faces said yes. I sensed relief in their voices, maybe guilt for letting the care between us lapse. I felt responsible then, for the nature of their deaths, and suddenly anxious that I had not quizzed the doctor enough. How would our lives end? Would we be in pain?

When the doctor proposed the plan to me—the anatomy department was struggling to get its hands on bodies these days—it seemed like a brave experiment. I didn't understand the practical reality until I saw Tally Ho, Crawford, Nina, all behind sound-proofed glass, having our heads spliced open and the skin stripped from our scalps and necks while we were still alive. Their skin was elastic, unreal, it stretched for ages before it finally snapped. What was real was the horror in our faces.

In the morning, all I could see were bodies twisting in the fern fronds, vertebrae in the yellowed books stacked on the library shelves.

*Try again,* Mavis said.

The next man's card read: *Harry Cox, Journalist.* What a name. Like Harry Crawford but with multiple cocks. I imagined them squirming in his pants like Medusa's head as he sat opposite, holding his smile just out of reach.

It was a charming smile, full of teeth that were brighter than teeth, the way fishing lures are brighter than fish.

*Why did you do it?* he asked.

*I had no choice.*

He couldn't scribble in his notebook fast enough.

*One sec,* I said. *Why did I do what? Dress as a man?*

*Hmm?* he said, half-listening, still writing. *So, you came to Australia on a Norwegian barque ...*

*Did I?* This was news to me.

*Tell me a little about your time at sea ...*

*My time at sea?* I tried a smile. *Haven't I lived most of my life at sea?*

In his notebook he wrote: *At sea—six years.*

What I'd wanted to tell Harry Cox and his multiple cocks is this:

I was once a partner in a laundry business with a woman my family knew. Mrs D'Angeli ran the shop while I carted starched linen around Double Bay with my daughter by my side. Because we worked separately, the old woman didn't see how I slogged. She thought she was a tortoise, carrying the weight of the business on her back. Her limbs swelled in the steam until they looked like loose-skinned sausages that jiggled when she walked. This was evidence, she moaned, that she was doing all the work. She didn't count the work of the black girls from Parramatta. She only noticed them when something went missing, or when they themselves disappeared.

Everything was in her name: the house, the laundry, my daughter's future. *Sit down and write a will,* I urged her, and she did, but the old hag never signed it. When she eventually kicked the bucket she did so instantly, pulling a string of starched sheets down as she went. They sat around her, as stiff as sugared egg whites, and sweated in the heat.

As a mother with no husband, no work and nothing to any of my names, what else could I do but try on the suits her dead husband left in their wardrobe? They were moth-nibbled and old, but they fit like skin. Wouldn't you have done that, Rita? If I'd stayed a woman I'd have earned half the wages of a man. I had two mouths to feed. It was simple maths.

But Mr Cox did not ask the right questions, so he never heard any of that.

The next journalist met me in a room empty of furniture or decoration, save for a big table, two chairs, and a long form against the wall. I entered the room and waited for instruction. Asked by a distant warder's voice to take a chair, I chose the form. I wanted to lean against the wall, did not want my back exposed to the unpredictable hands of others.

The journalist noted my choice, and when I pulled a pink handkerchief from my pocket, it was not wasted on him.

J. D. Corbett was clean-shaven, his cheeks and chin still red from the razor. He smelled of soap and his eyes were a soft gravy brown—a comfortable brown, though he couldn't have

been more uncomfortable in his scratchy suit. I wondered for a moment if he would rather be wearing a dress.

*What do you miss most?* he asked. *George Street? The shops? The lights scrawling across the harbour?*

He asked me these questions and I forgot who was supposed to be wringing whose heart. *Please help me*, I said. *I have no friends, no money, no influence.*

He was trying to believe me. He nodded a concerned nod.

*I was convicted on circumstantial evidence*, I said. *I was what other people made me, that's all.*

But sitting on either side of that large table we were making each other up as we danced around what we thought the other wanted us to say.

I told J. D. Corbett that soon after I lost my job, I found Daisy drinking at home. Maybe she hadn't drunk as much as I thought, but I knew we wouldn't make rent and she was at the table with her feet up, swishing a nip of gin as if she were the landed gentry. I didn't hold back and said she should go off with that plumber I heard she was so keen on if she was going to drink like that and I have tried to remember the rest of our conversation but my memory will not give it over. I went for a walk to Five Dock Bay and watched the prawns get frisky in the moonlight and when I came back half her clothes and she herself were gone.

After three days of waiting I sold up the furniture and took her boy and together we went to lodgings. I know I should have gone to the police but I hoped she'd come back after that plumber had had it up to here with her drinking too. Also I worried (correctly, it seems) that if the police got one whiff of the breasts under my suit they would make up hidden murderous agendas to go with them.

It was hard living with her boy because he looked so much like her, and asked questions about her, none of which I could answer. He began to be like a flea, biting at the one sore over and over again, so we went our separate ways after a time.

Have you noticed that when you assume people think you are guilty, you answer their questions in the manner of someone who is guilty? When I was a kid someone stole the scissors from Sister Katherine's desk, and even though I didn't steal them I thought, *They will think I did*, so I said in a loud voice, *I WONDER WHO DID THAT? GOSH I'M GLAD IT WASN'T ME*, after which everyone, of course, decided it was.

This is what it was like after Daisy went away. Neighbours asked after her, so did old friends. I could see that if I said *I don't know where she is*, they would think I was lying, so I tried to sound as though I knew where she went. To one woman I mentioned she'd gone to North Sydney, to another I said she'd left with the plumber from Balmain. I couldn't admit I knew nothing about my wife—where she would want to go, and who with.

Three years later the police dragged me out of the cellar at the Empire Hotel to tell me I had murdered her, then locked me up and asked over and over: *What happened?* When I didn't say anything, they worked out a past for me, and my God it was convincing. I began to wonder if it was more convincing than the truth.

They took me to a hallway in a building without signs and held me against the closed door of a room. I could hear hammering and sawing inside. Eventually they opened the door and lead me to a long box on a high table. The air was thick with dust and the dank smell of

underground animals. Inside the box I caught glimpses of bone through traces of dirt and I was surprised by the whiteness of her skeleton despite the worms and clumps of clay and smell of rot. It was as white as the coats of the doctors who leaned with metal instruments clanking at the end of their hands.

The detectives held my face up to the hollow eye sockets and toothless grin of a skull. *This is the woman you murdered*, they said. They had me by the neck so I couldn't look away. I closed my eyes but that grin burned red through my eyelids. Its toothless, bone mouth was open wide in an expression of delirious joy. *I've got you now!* it seemed to say. *They'll never let a freak like you off the hook!*

The story made Smith's Weekly, page one. Mavis brought it to the library and in her best out-loud voice she read: *To-day Eugene Fallini, pink handkerchief in her gnarled hand, makes a humble, feminine gesture of entreaty. She beseeches her freedom. She does not want to die in gaol ...*

I had them read me the article again and again. I committed the words to memory. All week I fluttered the handkerchief for show, using it to wipe the corners of my mouth to great imaginary applause, but one week revealed that the article had a very different effect to the one I had hoped for.

Young Birkett and the detectives had spent the past ten years sitting in a circle, stewing on their rage until I emerged between their blazing lines of sight, more animal than a salivating werewolf of the steppes. *Eugene Falleni, that murderous human monster ...* the Truth wrote on their behalf. *This harsh-voiced, obscene-tongued, evil-featured person ...* they went on to say, before declaring that it was in the interests of justice that I have no right whatever to be allowed loose among society again.

As I read, I felt something harden behind my sternum. Like a tree, I was growing a layer of brittle wood around my green core. I coughed up whatever was left. It came out thick and yellow, and eventually I could no longer walk.

When the air was drier they wheeled me out into the fernery. Sitting beneath the tree-fern was a short, stocky man with a landslide chin and coke bottle glasses. He was Italian, and like me you could see that he was haunted by some aspect of himself he wanted to cut out and burn. He asked me questions I would have answered, but the coughing had changed my voice into the echo of a voice, heard at the end of a drain.

One week later, Joe Lamaro, son of Italian fruit vendors and Attorney-General, took pity and announced my release.

I should have been overjoyed, but I couldn't eat my hominy the morning of my release.

*Don't be nervous, Jean*, Mavis said, watching me move my spoon through the glop. *What's the worst that could happen?*

Outside the prison gates the journalists who followed me from court would be crouching behind their flash bulbs. Their beards long, their hair grey, they would be waiting to solve the riddles in the story of their careers, drafted ten years back and set aside until this very mo-

ment. *Why did you kill her? Who is your daughter's father? Were you raped, is that why you are the way you are?* The worst that could happen is that they would begin to swarm, reaching for bits they could keep in formaldehyde. A tooth, an eyeball. *Is the iris grey or hazel?* they would ask their colleagues. Some would say hazel and some would say grey. An argument would ensue. The story of the eyeball's host would be told—*She was a man and a woman at the same time!*—until news would be received of a man, this time, in a dress. They would rush to find him, leaving the rest of me to feed the currawongs and feral cats. That is the worst that could happen.

But when I walked through the prison gates it was already dark. I passed an old, veiled woman. Her hands gripped a plate of homemade biscuits. I smiled as she passed, but she didn't notice. I checked my hand—I was not invisible—and looked up to see my face reflected in the window of a brand-new automobile parked half up on the curb. I'd seen my face in the prison mirror and hadn't paid much attention. But here, in the stark electric streetlight I looked like a woman I did not recognise.

From the forehead down my reflected face peeled away, revealing the face of another woman behind the glass. It was the woman they called the Silver Lining. A nervous smile flashed across her face.

*Hello Jean,* said another woman leaning across from the front seat. As she waved, her white-gloved fingers looked like tentacles feeling around for a meal. It was Lady Reay, gloved and hatted and ready to collect me for 'rehabilitation'.

They gave me the front passenger seat so I could sit next to Reay—or Dorri, as these women called her. I hadn't seen her in over a year, but she was not making eye contact with me. I wanted to touch her hand resting on the gearstick, but she tugged it and the clutch rasped as if gasping for breath.

It was a miracle anyone let her drive, considering what they'd done to her.

About a year before her release, Reay had pulled me behind the library shelves to say she had news. They wanted to take a piece of her brain away, she said.

*You're not going to let them, are you?* I was worried by the look of wonderment on her face.

*Of course I am,* she said, *if it means they'll let me out.*

*But will it turn you into a vegetable?*

*Perhaps,* she said, *but I don't have much to lose any more.*

They discussed Reay's operation in the press, and a woman recently released thought she'd contribute by gabbing about Mrs Mort's special treatment in gaol. After that they were even more eager for bits of her brain, but not so keen on the idea of letting her loose. When they told her she would not be released—not to gain strength before her operation, or to recover afterwards—she flat out refused to let them take any of her brain, not a single grey worm of it. She found me tugging at weeds in the fernery and shouted at me as I did, but the fierceness of her conviction was too strong for her delicate frame and she looked about to break. *They shan't do it. What is the benefit to me?* she said, *That I might not become so drearily*



bored staring at the walls of the prison hospital, day in day out? I would rather be an hysteric in this place, at least it gives me plenty to think about.

I sprayed a fern with pesticide, and Reay enjoyed the nervous release of a sneeze.

*Lovely*, she said, suddenly calm. *Thank you, Jean, I needed that.*

A psychiatrist came, and Mr Mort, her husband, and an old family doctor who had stitched up the heads of her brother and mother after her father had attacked them with the blunt end of an axe. She decided to have a cold when they came to talk her into the operation. She wanted them to find her in bed, because it gave her an opportunity to wear her navy kimono with the pink irises. The men fluffed her pillow and asked the warders how she was. After they left she was right as rain, not a sniffle in sight.

*You see, there is a taint*, Reay whispered to me in the exercise yard.

We were doing our stretches. All of us in grey cotton, Reay in silk. Occasionally she joined in. *I never was mad until my father woke up that night, and hacked into Mother's head with the axe*, she said, arms up straight as a pole. *It was the fear of madness that finally pushed me over the edge. When you stare straight into the eyes of whatever it is you are most afraid of becoming, you start emulating it, despite yourself.* The warder leading us through our routine had one leg forward. She lunged and we did too, as far as our stiff hips would permit. *They always said I had my father's eyebrows*, Reay said. *That's all I could think of when they told me what he'd done. I should have been grieving, or crying, but I was thinking of his eyebrows.*

Above us, the blue sky stretched up into forever. From where we lunged in the exercise yard, it looked like that was all there was beyond the prison walls. I wondered if her father thought he was doing his family a favour, slicing off the tops of their heads so they could find release.

But then, in the library, she told me she'd changed her mind again. She had been reading plays, she said, and had had an epiphany. *It was all an act*, she said. *My fainting at my trial, my muttering about world trips and babies. And yet the strangest thing began to happen. I couldn't tell the difference anymore, between acting and its opposite. Or rather, I realised I didn't know what its opposite was. Truly, the only time one is not acting is when one is out cold, and that is only because one has no memory of it. Even whilst lightly sleeping one plays picture shows behind the eyelids.* She took me by the hands. *Jean, don't you see? If everything is acting, then nothing is genuine. Or rather, everything acted is all that is genuine. So perhaps I am as mad as I have affected to be. And by that logic, yes, they should take a piece of my brain.*

They eventually did operate on Reay. They came at night and took her to the Coast Hospital in a slick black motorcar. She was gone for two weeks, and when she came back she did nothing but sleep for months. I missed her ibis beak nose, her pendulum breasts, her knees like the knees on a giraffe. I missed her coolly watching on, as I worked like every other prisoner in the place, but I had my own ghosts to worry about. No one was allowed to distract her, the library was closed, and even the other prisoners stopped slagging her off behind her back. Most of us resented her special attention, that was true, but the special attention of psychiatrists was something no one envied.

In the fernery I squashed the bright green caterpillars between finger and thumb, and let the slaters roam free. To be brown or grey, I thought, is not such a terrible fate.

When she came to collect me, she was still Reay, but better-dressed and duller in the eyes. We were instructed to stay quiet and slump down in the seats to be out of view of the prying eyes of journalists. *The plan is*, Reay said, pulling off the curb, *to throw them off our scent*. She was convinced the road was lined with journalists hiding in the shadows behind trees. She assured us it was best to drive along the road closest to the sea, where the fierce on-shore wind meant no trees could ever grow, and thus no journalists could hide behind the trunks of said trees in order to take down the co-ordinates of her car at every turn.

*Are you sure you've driven one of these before?* the Silver Lining said, gripping her seat with two hands.

Reay's headlights set the pupils of a possum alight and for a moment we glimpsed the hell that burned inside the furry shell of its body.

Thump.

The Silver Lining screamed. *Oh Dorri, was that a cat?*

*No dear, just a possum.*

*Oh.*

We were all rattled after that, and when white light could be seen, an anaemic dawn rising above the curve of the road, Reay switched off the headlights, and turned into the nearest laneway too sharply. She mounted the curb and winded a post box. Headlights swung past, and I could feel the Silver Lining analysing the moving angles of my profile as it did. I tensed my jaw to give it a more masculine edge and made that sound men make when they clear their throats to help her see how I could have been the man-woman after all, and she had not been jilted.

*Yes*, Reay said, starting up the motorcar again, *hard to imagine how anyone ever took her for a man, isn't it?* The Silver Lining quickly turned to look at the lights out of the window.

The lights. My God, the lights. Since I had been inside Long Bay the city had been electrified. The whole place was trying to dazzle us. What was it trying to hide?

The curtains in the Silver Lining's house were embroidered with flowers of a dangerous size—the kind you might find in a rainforest, baring teeth. The fabric of the curtains was so heavy that even if you'd been standing in the room in the middle of the day, you would never have known. At night the electric lamps were left on and the hours hummed along in a dim haze. In that house, time evaporated into the high ceilings. The carpet looked as if it had never been stepped on, the lounge never sat on, and the moment a person moved, a half-caste girl materialized from the shadows to erase any trace of the movement.

Reay's madness was more sinister and ordinary than I'd first suspected. When I looked down to find my shoelace undone she nudged the girl until she said, *Here, Mrs Ford, let me do that.*

*It's fine*, I said. *I can tie my own shoelaces.* And with that the girl melded back into the shadows.

There were Aboriginal women at Long Bay—more than I'd ever met in the outside world. Most of them had been locked up for barely any reason at all. The Silver Lining collected them when they were released, though they often vanished in the night, never to return, not even for their pay. *It's a common problem, she said. Those girls are like cats, you can make up a warm bed for them, but they are determined to wander off wailing in the night to sleep wherever they want.*

I lay awake that night thinking of all the half-caste girls in the wealthy houses across Sydney, rising from their beds and vanishing the way the black girl had done at the laundry in Double Bay. Where did she end up? The police couldn't find her, but they never looked that hard. Years later they became convinced she'd been my first victim; that I'd boiled her in the laundry tubs and turned her into glue.

How do the wandering girls know where to go? It bothers people, that there is no fixed place. When dawn broke I thought I saw a girl close the door behind her, and turned to see that my clothes had been replaced with a dress—somewhere between blue and green—and a possum-skin stole. I wanted to ask the girl if she knew a black girl who'd worked in a laundry in Double Bay, but I could hear the girl pad down the hall and I thought how stupid of me, to think they all know each other.

I wondered what was worse—to be invisible, or to become the kind of thick-skinned person who can ignore what they do not wish to see. Both were reason enough to leave, I supposed, and I packed the following day.

*Don't be a fool, the Silver Lining said over her boiled egg. You've a house over your head, free meals, women who care for you. Where on earth will you go?*

*No fixed address, I said.*

She eyed me from across the table with a pitying look. I was too old and stubborn to change in the way she had hoped.

Rita, did you ever see an old woman watch you from the street? I was on my way to collect you when I left the Silver Lining's place, only once I was outside the convent gate I found I couldn't move. You were in the yard—there was no doubt it was you. Your dark curls were springing in all directions as you leapt over a statue of Our Lady without running up to it first. I thought to myself: *You are no granny for her, Jean Ford. She is at the beginning, she could go any which way from here, and better ways than you ever did.* How would I begin to explain where I've been? I could blame Arthur for leaving you with the nuns, but I would have to say something for myself, too, and I couldn't say anything good. Once you had run inside, I turned and walked back to the railway station. *I should make something of myself first, I thought. I should be the sort of granny a girl wouldn't be ashamed to climb all over.*

It is now many years later, but I am something. I was a boarder at first. Then I cleaned the boarding house instead of paying rent. And then I cleaned for pay, and cooked too, and fixed the pipes when they were leaking. I scrimped and saved until I could afford to take up the lease on my own. I spruced it up, and offered clean, no-fuss housing at affordable rates. I kept myself to myself and my tenants kept to their rooms.

Luckily no one at my boarding house ever looked at the legs of the kitchen table. If they did, they might have noticed how one leg resembled the leg of my first wife. It tapped its toes occasionally, demanding to be noticed, until I kicked it in the shin. There was quite a collection of bruises up that leg, all at different stages of the healing process. Some were blue, some were plum purple, some were yellow. Some were the colour of the sky before a storm. My guests never noticed the table leg, but they noticed the sound of my shoe thumping bone. I knew what they thought. I had seen their eyes slide from side to side in their heads, looking at me then looking at each other. It got so I was always standing in front of the table, trying to shield the leg from view. I can't go on like this, I thought, and I sold the boarding house with the intention of moving us to a place where table legs look like table legs, and grandmothers can live with granddaughters without any questions asked.

£100 seemed to be enough for a new life. I had it in my purse today—was it today?—leaving the bank, crossing Oxford Street, thinking: how will I find her? Then two shrieks in quick succession. A cockatoo above. I looked, remembering another I had seen. An automobile braked. The face of the driver rushed at me from a past no longer mine. I wondered if it was him as the car hit my hip and I flew back, carried by a tidal wave to smack my head against the—what was it?—against the siderail of the ship, and there's Horse tickling me, although it isn't a game any more, is it?

Your grandfather's face. Dates. Names are slipping.

Drunk. At sea. Only paying attention to our bodies and the urges that made them paw flesh, we came to life in the places the other had touched. I pinned him down. He tried to roll me over, but he was drunker, or I was stronger—not in terms of muscle, in terms of fight. I had his hips gripped between my knees, his penis in my palm. *This is why I love you*, he mumbled. *You take matters into your own hands*. It looked like a large purple mushroom, alien to us both. It grew out of black hair that could have been mine or could have been his, and when I touched it I felt the nerves spark up its length, as if they had been mine.

- Detective Sergeant Watkins of the Central Police. This is the woman?
- Yes Detective, but I'm afraid—
- A finger missing on her left hand. How old did you say she was?
- It's hard to say. She had £100 on her. No identification.
- Thank you, Sister. We'll handle the body from here.